



Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism For Third-Year Students



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(2021-2022)**



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جامعة كفر الشيخ
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Preface

The objective of this book is to enable the students of English literary criticism to have insights into literary theories underpinning the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The book, in the process, is expected to cover a long period of the development of English literary theory with its going through cultural orientations to literary theories, in this context, are going to be mainly the foundation the literary activity of the two periods concerned: *Classicism and Romanticism*. The Eighteenth-century literary efforts and ideals are mainly based on the classical conception of the nature and function of art and literature as well as the classical emphasis on objectivity, in contrast with the nineteenth century poetry that operates within Romantic theory of poetry with its stress on subjectivity.

The students of the two types of literary criticism, understandably, should be aware of the great differences between them. So, if the outside world including the poet himself is to be considered a circle with his ego as the centre of this circle, so the more he comes closer to the centre of the circle the more subjective and romantic he will be. In contrast, the more he moves away from this centre, the more objective and classical he becomes. In the Augustan age (the Restoration and the eighteenth century) the poets came to move away from themselves, their egos, and their personal concerns to deal with more public, universal issues. In the nineteenth century the Romantic poets revolted against such objectivity and preferred the highest degree of self-introspection and solipsism. The poetry of the two periods differed greatly.

The Augustan literature, therefore, is devoted to following the rules laid down by the ancients as well as given to imitation and representation of the outside reality. Its aim was to please and instruct, though instruction had the priority over pleasure. So, the best part of the Augustan literature represents a kind of socio-political criticism.

The nineteenth century literature is based, on the hand, on the Romantic ideals of spontaneity, inspiration, subjectivity, and hyper sensitivity. So, the major part of it is mainly concerned with self-expression with the objective of attaining the greatest amount of pleasure. This type of literature, accordingly, is characterized with simplicity, musicality, flowery language, imaginativeness, rich imagery, the heavy use of symbolism, and the glorification of Nature as a reflection of its pantheism; all such prerequisites are

guides by the preachings and statements of such eminent and pioneering masters such as Wordsworth and Coleridge.

The students of the two types of poetry, in this way, should be aware of the differences between the two literary theories, so that a perfect appreciation of them be fully attainable. However, it is of prime importance for the students to be always conscious of the differences between the critics related to the same movements, and even the single critic's polyphony and variety of orientations and visions throughout his long literary career. So, the reader of Alexander Pope and Dr Samuel Johnson will come across similarities and differences among them. Equally significant, William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge pose differences that might turn out sometimes to be serious ones and to be represented as chasms in the Romantic unity of thought.

The current course is expected, hopefully, to examine the critical efforts of a variety of writers related to the two literary movements that are the main concern of the current course. However, the student will be interested in applying the main features of every movement to the writers included under its umbrella with caution since every single writer has his individual literary personality, his taste, his own mood, and his moral peculiarity as well. This is truer as far as the Romantics are concerned since revolt against rules and traditions is inveterate aspect of their nature.

Part I

Neo-classical School of Criticism



Neoclassical criticism

0. Introduction

1. French influence

2. John Dryden

3. Alexander Pope

4. Samuel Johnson

4.5. 18th-century Aesthetics

Introduction to Neoclassicism

After the Renaissance—a period of exploration and expansiveness—came a reaction in the direction of order and restraint. Generally speaking, this reaction developed in France in the mid-seventeenth century and in England thirty years later; and it dominated European literature until the last part of the eighteenth century.

The New Restraint

Writers turned from inventing new words to regularizing vocabulary and grammar. Complex, boldly metaphorical language, such as Shakespeare used in his major tragedies, is clarified and simplified--using fewer and more conventional [figures of speech](#). Mystery and obscurity are considered symptoms of incompetence rather than signs of grandeur. The ideal style is lucid, polished, and precisely appropriate to the genre of a work and the social position of its characters. Tragedy and high comedy, for example, use the language of cultivated people and maintain a well-bred tone. The crude humor of the gravediggers in *Hamlet* or the pulling out of Gloucester's eyes in *King Lear* would no longer be admitted in tragedy. Structure, like tone, becomes more simple and unified. In contrast to Shakespeare's plays, those of neoclassical playwrights such as Racine and Moliere develop a single plot line and are strictly limited in time and place (often, like Moliere's *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, to a single setting and a single day's time).

Influence of the Classics

The period is called *neoclassical* because its writers looked back to the ideals and art forms of classical times, emphasizing even more than their Renaissance predecessors the classical ideals of order and rational control. Such simply constructed but perfect works as the Parthenon and Sophocles' *Antigone*, such achievements as the peace and order established

by the Roman Empire (and celebrated in Book VI of Vergil's *Aeneid*), suggest what neoclassical writers saw in the classical world. Their respect for the past led them to be conservative both in art and politics. Always aware of the conventions appropriate to each genre, they modeled their works on classical masterpieces and heeded the "rules" thought to be laid down by classical critics. In political and social affairs, too, they were guided by the wisdom of the past: traditional institutions had, at least, survived the test of time. No more than their medieval and Renaissance predecessors did neoclassical thinkers share our modern assumption that change means progress, since they believed that human nature is imperfect, human achievements are necessarily limited, and therefore human aims should be sensibly limited as well. It was better to set a moderate goal, whether in art or society, and achieve it well, than to strive for an infinite ideal and fail. Reasonable Philinte in *The Misanthrope* does not get angry at people's injustice, because he accepts human nature as imperfect.

Neoclassical Assumptions and Their Implications

Neoclassical thinkers could use the past as a guide for the present because they assumed that human nature was constant--essentially the same regardless of time and place. Art, they believed, should express this essential nature: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature" (Samuel Johnson). An individual character was valuable for what he or she revealed of universal human nature. Of course, all great art has this sort of significance--Johnson made his statement about Shakespeare. But neoclassical artists more consciously emphasized common human characteristics over individual differences, as we see in the type-named characters of Moliere.

If human nature has remained constant over the centuries, it is unlikely that any startling new discoveries will be made. Hence neoclassical artists did not strive to be original so much as to express old truths in a newly effective way. As Alexander Pope, one of their greatest poets, wrote: "True wit is nature to advantage dressed, / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." Neoclassical writers aimed to articulate general truth rather than unique vision, to communicate to others more than to express themselves.

Social Themes

Neoclassical writers saw themselves, as well as their readers and characters, above all as members of society. Social institutions might be foolish or corrupt--indeed, given the intrinsic limitations of human nature, they probably were--but the individual who rebelled against custom or asserted his superiority to humankind was, like Alceste in *The Misanthrope*, presented as presumptuous and absurd. While Renaissance writers were sometimes fascinated by rebels, and later Romantic artists often glorified them, neoclassical artists expected people to conform to established social norms. For individual opinion was far less likely to be true than was the consensus of society, developed over time and embodied in custom and tradition. As the rules for proper writing should be followed, so should the rules for civilized conduct in society. Neither Moliere nor Jane Austen advocate blind following of convention, yet both insist that good manners are important as a manifestation of self-control and consideration for others.

The Age of Reason

The classical ideals of order and moderation which inspired this period, its realistically limited aspirations, and its emphasis on the common sense of society rather than individual imagination, could all be characterized as

rational. And, indeed, it is often known as the Age of Reason. Reason had traditionally been assumed to be the highest mental faculty, but in this period many thinkers considered it a sufficient guide in all areas. Both religious belief and morality were grounded on reason: revelation and grace were de-emphasized, and morality consisted of acting rightly to one's fellow beings on this earth. John Locke, the most influential philosopher of the age, analyzed logically how our minds function (1690), argued for religious toleration (1689), and maintained that government is justified not by divine right but by a "social contract" that is broken if the people's natural rights are not respected.

As reason should guide human individuals and societies, it should also direct artistic creation. Neoclassical art is not meant to seem a spontaneous outpouring of emotion or imagination. Emotion appears, of course; but it is consciously controlled. A work of art should be logically organized and should advocate rational norms. *The Misanthrope*, for example, is focused on its theme more consistently than are any of Shakespeare's plays. Its hero and his society are judged according to their conformity or lack of conformity to Reason, and its ideal, voiced by Philinte, is the reasonable one of the golden mean. The cool rationality and control characteristic of neoclassical art fostered wit, equally evident in the regular couplets of Moliere and the balanced sentences of Austen.

Sharp and brilliant wit, produced within the clearly defined ideals of neoclassical art, and focused on people in their social context, make this perhaps the world's greatest age of comedy and satire.

NEOCLASSICAL LITERARY CRITICISM

Neoclassicism refers to a broad tendency in literature and art enduring from the early seventeenth century until around 1750. While the nature of this tendency inevitably varied across different cultures, it was usually marked by a number of common concerns and characteristics. Most fundamentally, neoclassicism comprised a return to the classical models, literary styles, and values of ancient Greek and Roman authors. In this, the neoclassicists were to some extent heirs of the Renaissance humanists. But many of them reacted sharply against what they perceived to be the stylistic excess, superfluous ornamentation, and linguistic oversophistication of some Renaissance writers; they also rejected the lavishness of the Gothic and Baroque styles.

Many major medieval and Renaissance writers, including Dante, Ariosto, More, Spenser, and Milton, had peopled their writings with fantastic and mythical beings. Authors such as Giraldis had attempted to justify the genre of the romance and the use of the “marvelous” and unreal elements. Sidney and others had even proposed, in an idealizing Neo-Platonist strain, that the poet’s task was to create an ideal world, superior to the world of nature. The neoclassicists, reacting against this idealistic tendency in Renaissance poetics, might be thought of as heirs to the other major tendency in Renaissance poetics, which was Aristotelian. This latter impetus had been expressed in the work of Minturno, Scaliger, and Castelvetro, who all wrote commentaries on Aristotle’s *Poetics* and stressed the Aristotelian notion of probability, as well as the “unities” of action, time, and place.

However, whereas many Renaissance poets had labored toward an individualism of outlook, even as they appropriated elements of the classical canon, the neoclassicists in general were less ambiguous in their emphasis

upon the classical values of objectivity, impersonality, rationality, decorum, balance, harmony, proportion, and moderation.

Whereas many Renaissance poets were beginning to understand profoundly the importance of invention and creativity, the neoclassical writers reaffirmed literary composition as a rational and rule-bound process, requiring a great deal of craft, labor, and study. Where Renaissance theorists and poets were advocating new and mixed genres, the neoclassicists tended to insist on the separation of poetry and prose, the purity of each genre, and the hierarchy of genres (though, unlike Aristotle, they generally placed the epic above tragedy). The typical verse forms of the neoclassical poets were the *alexandrine* in France and the *heroic couplet* in England. Much neoclassical thought was marked by a recognition of human finitude, in contrast with the humanists' (and, later, the Romantics') assertion of almost limitless human potential.

Two of the concepts central to neoclassical literary theory and practice were imitation and nature, which were intimately related. In one sense, the notion of imitation – of the external world, and primarily, of human action – was a reaffirmation of the ideals of objectivity and impersonality, as opposed to the increasingly sophisticated individualism and exploration of subjectivity found in Renaissance writers. But also integral to this notion was imitation of classical models, especially Homer and Vergil. In fact, these two aspects of imitation were often identified, as by Pope. The identification was based largely on the concept of nature. This complex concept had a number of senses. It referred to the harmonious and hierarchical order of the universe, including the various social and political hierarchies within the world. In this vast scheme of nature, everything had its proper and appointed place. The concept also referred to human nature: to what was central, timeless, and universal in human experience. Hence, “nature” had a

deep moral significance, comprehending the modes of action that were permissible and excluding certain actions as “unnatural” (a term often used by Shakespeare to describe the murderous and cunning behavior of characters such as Lady Macbeth). Clearly, the neoclassical vision of nature was very different from the meanings later given to it by the Romantics; this vision inherited something of the medieval view of nature as a providential scheme but, as will emerge shortly, it was informed by more recent scientific views of nature rather than by Aristotelian physics.

The neoclassical writers generally saw the ancients such as Homer and Vergil as having already discovered and expressed the fundamental laws of nature. Hence, the external world, including the world of human action, could best be expressed by modern writers if they followed the path of imitation already paved by the ancients. Invention was of course allowed, but only as a modification of past models, not in the form of a rupture. Having said all of this, the neoclassicists were by no means devoted to slavish imitation of the classics. La Bruyère indeed thought that the ancients had already expressed everything that was worth saying; and Pope, in one of his more insistent moments, equated following the rules of nature with the imitation of Homer. But Ben Jonson, Corneille, Dryden, and many others were more flexible in their assimilation of classical values. Nearly all of them acknowledged the genius of Shakespeare, some the genius of Milton; Boileau recognized the contribution of an inexplicable element, the *je ne sais quoi*, in great art, and Pope acknowledged that geniuses could attain “a grace beyond the reach of art.” Moreover, the neoclassicists attempted to develop and refine Aristotle’s account of the emotions evoked by tragedy in an audience, and an important part of their endeavor to imitate nature consisted in portraying the human passions. There raged at the beginning of the eighteenth-century various debates over the relative merits of “ancients”

and “moderns.” The ancients were held to be the repository of good sense, natural laws, and the classical values of order, balance, and moderation. Such arguments were found in Jonathan Swift’s [*The Battle of the Books* \(1704\)](#) and in the writings of Boileau and Pope. Proponents of the “modern” laid stress on originality of form and content, flexibility of genre, and the license to engage in new modes of thought. The connection of neoclassicism to recent science and what would eventually emerge as some of the core values of the Enlightenment was highly ambivalent and even paradoxical. On the one hand, the neoclassical concept of nature was informed by Newtonian physics, and the universe was acknowledged to be a vast machine, subject to fixed analyzable laws. On the other hand, the tenor of most neoclassical thought was retrospective and conservative. On the surface, it might seem that the neoclassical writers shared with Enlightenment thinkers a belief in the power of reason. The neoclassicists certainly saw literature as subject to a system of rules, and literary composition as a rational process, subject to the faculty of judgment (Pope uses the word “critic” in its original Greek sense of “judge”). But, while it is true that some neoclassical writers, especially in Germany, were influenced by Descartes and other rationalists, the “reason” to which the neoclassical writers appeal is in general not the individualistic and progressive reason of the Enlightenment (though, as will be seen in a later chapter, Enlightenment reason could from other perspectives be seen as a coercive and oppressive force); rather, it is the “reason” of the classical philosophers, a universal human faculty that provides access to general truths and which is aware of its own limitations. Alexander Pope and others emphasized the finitude of human reason, cautioning against its arrogant and unrestricted employment. Reason announced itself in neoclassical thought largely in [Aristotelian and sometimes Horatian](#) terms: an adherence to the requirements of probability

and verisimilitude, as well as to the three unities, and the principle of decorum. But the verisimilitude or likeness to reality here sought after was different from nineteenth-century realism that sought to depict the typical elements and the universal truths about any given situation; it did not operate via an accumulation of empirical detail or a random recording of so-called reality. It was reason in this Aristotelian sense that lay behind the insistence on qualities such as order, restraint, moderation, and balance.

Interestingly, Michael Moriarty has argued that the neoclassical insistence on adherence to a body of rules embodies an ideological investment which must be understood in terms of broader developments in the literary market. A specifically literary criticism, he urges, began to emerge as a specialized and professional discipline in the seventeenth century, with literature being identified as an autonomous field of study and expertise. Seventeenth-century criticism addressed an expanded readership which it helped to create: this broader public ranged from the aristocracy of the court and the salons to the middle strata of the bourgeoisie. The critical ideology of this public was oriented toward pleasure and to evaluation based on polite "taste." The rise of periodical presses during the second half of the seventeenth century "provided a new channel for discourse about literature addressed to a non-scholarly social elite." But there was a reciprocal interaction: the habits of literary consumption modified critical discourse; for example, despite the epic's high theoretical status, the demands and tastes of an increasing theater-going public generated far more criticism about drama. Along with these developments, a class of literary men newly emerged from bourgeois backgrounds, the *nouveaux doctes*, specialized in a specifically literary training, and focused on language, rhetoric, and poetics. This mastery enabled them to establish a new, more respectable identity for themselves as men of letters, whereby they could offer polite society the kind

of pleasure befitting its dignity. They defined this pleasure in Horatian terms, as necessarily conjoined with instruction; it was a refined pleasure, issuing from a conformity to rules. It was these rules, impersonally and sacredly embodied in ancient authorities such as Aristotle and Horace, and in modern authorities such as the Académie Française, which consecrated the work as a product of art and which legitimated “the poet’s status as a purveyor of pleasure” to the dominant groups.

This general tendency of neoclassicism toward order, clarity, and standardization was manifested also in attempts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to regulate the use of language and the meanings of words. In France, the Académie Française was established for this purpose in 1635, and writers such as François de Malherbe argued that meanings should be stabilized in the interests of linguistic clarity and communication. Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* was published in 1755. The impetus behind these endeavors was reflected in John Locke’s theory of language, and his insistence, following Descartes, that philosophy should proceed by defining its terms precisely, using “clear and distinct” ideas and avoiding figurative language. This ideal of clarity, of language as the outward sign of the operations of reason, permeated neoclassical poetry, which was often discursive, argumentative, and aimed to avoid obscurity. This movement toward clarity has been variously theorized as coinciding with the beginnings of bourgeois hegemony, as reacting against a proliferation of vocabulary and meanings during the Renaissance, and as marking a step further away from a medieval allegorical way of thinking toward an attempted literalization of language.

Ironically, neoclassicism helped prepare the way for its own demise. One avenue toward this self-transcendence of neoclassicism was through the concept of the sublime.

The first-century treatise called *On the Sublime*, attributed to “Longinus,” had viewed the sublime as a form of emotional transport beyond the rational faculty. Boileau’s translation of this text in 1674 was followed by flourishing discussions of the topic in England and Germany, which were often accompanied, as we shall see in chapter 14 on Kant, by an extensive examination of the concept of beauty. In fact, in England, the contrast “between sublimity and correctness had socio-political resonance, since the former was associated with the English subject’s liberty, the latter with both the English and the absolutist French court” (*CHLC*, V.III, 552–553). Another legacy of the neoclassicists was an examination of the notion of “taste” in terms of consensus of qualified people. This notion of consensus prepared the way for an aesthetic oriented toward reader response rather than mere adherence to an abstract body of rules. The following sections will consider some of the major figures of neoclassical literary criticism in the countries where it was most pronounced: France and England.

Chapter One

French influence

1.1. Pierre Corneille: The Dramatic Unities

1.2. Nicolas Boileau

During the 16th century, Italy had been the main influence on critical ideas. But in the early 17th century the authority shifts to France. French taste and fashions are exported to all of Europe; in the case of Britain, there is the additional circumstance of the exile of the court and nobility during the Commonwealth.

Neo-classical thought becomes generally established as the century advances. While the best works of the Italian Renaissance had been written outside the principles of neo-classicism, it is the other way round in France, where many of the leading writers are consciously following the principles dictated by the critics.

Corneille and Boileau are both courtly poets, working under the system of patronage. This situation will gradually change, due to the eventual development of popular genres in drama and narrative which are financed directly by the public. The system of patronage will gradually be frequently replaced by the subscriptions to a project before publication. Johnson's unsuccessful address to the Earl of Chesterfield, his independent success and his subsequent refusal of patronage have acquired a symbolic status in English literature.

1.1. Pierre Corneille (1606-1684)



Corneille was the leading French tragedian of the mid-XVII, an age when France is becoming the center of fashion and culture in Europe. The French critics like Le Bossu (*Discours du poème épique*) and Aubignac (*La Pratique du théâtre*) are now developing a rigid literary creed, demanding strict submission to the classical canon. Corneille is both a victim and a theorist of neo-Classicism. Some plays of his, like *Le Cid*, were criticised for taking liberties with the unities, and Corneille stated his views on the subject in his three *Discours du poème dramatique* (1660), which had a direct influence on Dryden's dramatic ideas, and of which the most significant is the "Discours des trois unités." Corneille sees the problems of dramatic theory from the practical viewpoint of a playwright, and this leads him to take a more liberal attitude than his critics. He anticipates Dryden in discussing the theoretical points using practical examples from his own plays and from the classics, pointing out the defects he finds in both where necessary. Corneille is not rigidly prescriptive on this subject. "Corneille tries to refer rules of dramatic art to common sense and to the situation of the audience as well as to Aristotle," and is aware of what Aristotle said and did not say on this point, "but believes that something like unity of place follows logically from unity

of time and unity of action" (Adams 218). In fact, the advice he gives on composition is appropriate for the kind of drama he wrote.

The Unity of Action

As Aristotle said, the plays must have a unity of action. But "the term *unity of action* does not mean the tragedy should show only one action on stage" (*Three Unities*, 219). Corneille understands it as referring to a unity of *obstacle to plans* in comedy and of *peril* in tragedy. If there are several elements which carry about this function, they must be logically linked. That is, there may be several actions which are incomplete and which reach completion only when the play is seen as a whole: they are subordinated to the main action. These incomplete actions will keep the minds of the audience in a "pleasant suspense". "There must be only one complete action, which leaves the mind of the spectator serene" (219).

The logical linkage of the actions also implies that each act has to prepare the developments which will take place in the next one. What happens on the stage must be necessary, not the product of coincidence, of some sudden change of mind, or of the intervention of the *deus ex machina*. If possible, the passage from one scene to the next must not be abrupt: it must also submit to an appearance of necessity.

Corneille repeats the Aristotelian and Horatian ideas on the parts of the action (complication and resolution) and the use of narration. If possible, this has to be restricted to events happening behind scenes while the action is taking place. Events previous to the action must be used as little as possible.

The play ought to be divided in 5 acts, and not in three, as the obstinate Spaniards will keep on doing. Each act should contain a greater part of the action than the previous one. The first should not advance the action, but prepare the second while it shows the moral nature of the characters and informs the audience of the situation of the story. As we said before, Corneille insists that the exits of the characters have to be accounted for; the entrances seem natural even if they are not explained, but they will have to be justified if there are two or more by the same character in the same act. So, Corneille is not only repeating but also developing the classical doctrine of verisimilitude and unity. Elements such as the "liaison des scènes" are not found in classical theory. He also justifies the use of stage directions, which did not exist in the Classics, for the benefit of the reader and the director of troops.

The Unity of Time

Corneille thinks that 30 hours is a more reasonable limit than just 24; it may be broadened if necessary. He believes that following too strictly the unity of time may lead to more defects and incongruities than those which result from a subtle compression of story-time (he sets Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* as an example of absurd subjection to the rule of time: the fall of Troy and Agamemnon's return occur at an interval of a few minutes). The best solution for dramatic time, Corneille believes, is to leave it indeterminate to the audience whenever possible. The audience will not think of it unless they are made aware of incongruities. Time indications are always clumsy in plays, Corneille believes, and it is better to leave them out. All acts must cover a similar amount of story time, but the fifth has the privilege of acceleration. The acts must be continuous, if possible, but any amount of story-time may be consumed during the intervals. And a good justification to include all the

events we need in the short time we are allowed is to choose for our play a day both illustrious and long-awaited. This subject is, moreover, a great ornament to a poem.

The Unity of Place

The requirement for a unity of place, Corneille notes, is not found in Aristotle or in Horace, only it seems a logical consequence of the unity of time. The closer we keep to a unity of place, the better, but there is a danger of its leading to absurdities, and so Corneille allows: "I should be willing to concede that a whole city has unity of place" (225). Only, the changes of place have to be made during the intervals between the acts. They must not be mentioned or shown through setting. As in the unity of time, Corneille believes that the best is to leave the place of the action undetermined: it must be an ideal "theatrical place," fictional, at once private and public, according to the needs of the action.

French playwrights developed the so-called "liaison des scènes," the linking-up of scenes, to emphasize the unities of time and place. The characters must come to the stage or leave it for some reason having to do with the plot, and the characters must meet in some way so that the audience knows that there is no change of place nor of time from a scene to the next. In this way, Corneille says, continuity of presentation helps shape continuity of action. He acknowledges it is not a rule: it is only an embellishment. But audiences have grown so accustomed to it that it has become something like a rule. This is a recognition that there is an authority of practical response in the audience, as well as the authority of the Ancients.

There are three possible links which can be established between one scene and the next: the characters in one scene may hear the others coming, or they

may see them coming, or they may meet for some time and speak. Corneille believes the last is the better, though he tolerates the second one too. The first, however, liaison through sound, is to be avoided.

As is the case of Dryden, Corneille defends his relaxation of the rules against critics, saying that it is easier to criticise than to write a successful play following the rules strictly. We may note that this relaxation of the rules leaves them more or less where Aristotle had defined them originally; only more specified.

1.2. Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636-1711)



Boileau is not an original critic. He follows a tradition that includes the critical work of Malherbe and Chapelain. Boileau and René Rapin were French critics whose influence is stronger in Britain towards the end of the 17th century.

Boileau's most famous work, *L'Art poétique* (1672), is written in the tradition of the Horatian epistle, with a somewhat more systematic structure. Its more direct model, however, is Vida's latin poem in three cantos *De arte poetica* (1527), as well as the swarm of epistles, poems and treatises which followed. But while Vida's work was not successful poetry,

Boileau's is at once poetical and theoretical. Its great success stimulated the fashion, which continued well into the 18th century. It was translated into English by Dryden and was imitated by many English writers in the late 17th and early 18th centuries (Rochester, Mulgrave, Roscommon, Granville, Wesley, and last but not least Pope in his *Essay on Criticism*).

The work is divided into four cantos. The first deals with general advice on the nature of poetry. Both talent and inspiration are necessary: hard work is not enough. Preciosism, exaggeration and farce are extremes which must be avoided; also, rime and reason must fit each other. Like Horace, Boileau gives a miniature treatise of versification and a history of (French) poetry. It is significant that he ignores the Middle Ages.

The second canto defines the minor lyrical and satiric genres: idyll, elegy, ode, sonnet, epigram, satire, song, etc.

The third deals with the major genres: tragedy, epic and comedy; he follows all the classical ideas of Horace + Aristotle, often simplifying them (above all Aristotle, whose systematic interests are beyond Boileau): to move and to please, verisimilitude rather than truth or improbability, decorum everywhere, etc. There is, however, a significant emphasis on *pleasing* , practically ignoring the didactic element of poetry which is often emphasized by Renaissance classical doctrine.

The last canto includes more general advice and an eulogy of the king, his patron. Boileau lives in an age of literary patronage, and takes for granted the role of the poet as a parasite and apologist; in this, as in many other things, he looks extremely conservative to us.

This scheme leaves many lacunae: Boileau does ignore the novel, the opera, the fable, and even the kind of didactic poem he is writing. Actually, the author is trying to be clever and entertaining, rather than systematic, and he introduces digressions, classical references, etc. just for the sake of variety and taste.

Rationalism is the predominant philosophy in France and it has an influence on aesthetics; even Pascal, who opposed his "esprit de finesse" to the "esprit de géométrie" believes that there are rules to please, as well as rules to prove. Only, "reason" is used in an arbitrary way, and many things are termed reasonable which we might wish to call *conventional*. Boileau is best known as the apologist of rule. This is clearly seen in the *Art poétique*, but we must not forget that he also allows a Longinian freedom to the truly great genius. Towards the end of the XVIIth century, he wrote a series of meditations on art under the title *Réflexions sur Longin*. He contributed a great deal to the diffusion of the Longinian principles. Now he thinks there are rules, but "when a passage in a discourse is admired by all, one must not look for reasons, or rather vain subtilities, to prevent this admiration, but rather manage to find the reasons of the admiration." And he wonders "whether the basic rule behind all rules is to please." Indeed his readiness to please may seem too far-fetched at times. You must only write that which is sure to please. More than that: while discussing poetic diction, one of his hobby-horses, Boileau submits thought and reason to diction:

Nothing is more debasing of a discourse than low words. Generally speaking, it is better to suffer a low thought expressed in noble terms than the noblest thought in the world expressed in low terms. The reason is that not everybody can judge of the rightness and shape of a thought, while practically nobody . . . ignores the vulgarity of words.

"Boileau argues that expression follows thought and that before writing we should learn to think" (Adams 258). We can compare this conception to Hobbes's idea that only what is clearly understood is a fit subject for poetry. This is a view which divorces language and thought, and it is not much favoured in our century: since the Romanticism (and since Vico, Croce, Sapir, Whorf) we prefer to think that language and thought help shape each other. Boileau says that form and content must be related (so, he opposes senseless rhyme and superfluous decoration), but his very assumptions tend to split them.

Boileau does not owe his fame to his genius, but to the circumstance that both his virtues and his limitations coincided with those of his age. (Hall 60). He is commonsensical, he insists on moderation, imitation and convention. Like Horace, he seems at times not so much concerned with defining the principles of literature or with teaching how to write, rather, his tone is worldly-wise, giving advice on how to prevent the poet from making a fool of himself. He is not an inventor, but he gives clever and catchy formulations of old principles. Boileau is not too subtle or deep as a thinker. But he has a keen sensibility and wit, and he is not as dogmatic as he looks. There are no good books, he believes, which are rejected by the public. His emphasis is on restraint, but the artist must have freedom to touch.

Chapter Two

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)



The age Pope writes in already accepts wholeheartedly the neoclassical principles which Dryden was still at pains to diffuse. *Pope's Essay on Criticism* (1711) is the English equivalent of Boileau's *Art poétique* in France: a re-statement of the neo-Classical principles when they already are generally known. It was his first important work (after the *Pastorals* and *Windsor Forest* ; just before *The Rape of the Lock*) and it is a perfect example of the kind of poetry Pope mastered: pointed¹, epigrammatic², aphoristic³ and not at all lyrical.

¹ (of a remark or look) expressing criticism in a direct and unambiguous way.

'pointed comments were made about racial discrimination within the army' / **cutting**, trenchant, biting, incisive, acid, acerbic, tart, caustic, scathing, mordant, razor-edged, venomous, venomous, piercing, penetrating.

² Epigrammatic/ADJECTIVE **In the style of an epigram; concise, clever, and amusing.**

'an epigrammatic style' / **concise**, succinct, terse, pithy, aphoristic, compact, condensed, compressed, short, brief / **epigrammatic** /,ɛpɪgrə'matɪk/

³ aphorism

NOUN/1A pithy observation which contains a general truth.

'the old aphorism 'the child is father to the man' / **mass noun** 'the debate begins and ends at the level of aphorism, with commentators saying that something must be done' / **proverb**, maxim, aphorism, axiom, adage, saw, tag, motto, precept, epigram, epigraph, dictum, gnome, pearl of wisdom / A concise statement of a scientific principle, typically by a classical author. / the opening sentence of the first aphorism of Hippocrates'

Pope's essay is modelled after the verse epistle of Horace and Boileau's *Art poétique*: it also follows a long line of imitations of these in Britain (Rochester, Mulgrave, Roscommon, Granville, Wesley). But, unlike them, it does not purport to deal with literature; **Pope's aim is to give advice to critics on evaluation, and not to writers on composition.** "Nevertheless he must establish the principles of sound artistic practice" (Adams 277) according to which poetry is to be judged; so, he will also focus on poetry. And, as a matter of fact, he thinks that only writers qualify for the role of critics:

1.

Let such teach others who themselves excel

And censure freely, who have written well.

He defines the intellectual and moral characteristics of the good critic.

For instance, the critic must not pay excessive attention to small faults; he must appreciate what is good, irrespective of its being old or new, foreign or national. He must control his obsessions and not sacrifice his judgement "to one loved folly "; he will seek to appreciate, rather than to find fault; he will avoid the extremities of novelty and tradition, etc. "Certainly what Pope recommends to the critic is superior to the varieties of critical narrowness that he draws up for censure" (Adams 237).

In the third part of the essay, **Pope points out the moral virtues required in the critic.** Knowledge is not sufficient: honesty is needed, too, and humility in putting forward his judgement, taking care not to offend:

Origin: Early 16th century from French aphorisme or late Latin aphorismus, from Greek aphorismos 'definition', from aphorizein 'define'. /əfəˈrɪz(ə)m/

"Without good breeding truth is disapproved." **A good critic must have a sense of proportion**, and know when to forbear criticising a great writer, while foolish critics will assail him with importunities:

2.

Nay, fly to the altars, there they'll talk you dead

For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Earlier on in the essay, the main advice given to the critic is not to set his pride against the author; to try to understand first the author's spirit and then judge accordingly. We must know a poet's culture, religion, etc. before we attempt to judge him. The Augustan age was scarcely a historically conscious period. It was given to the admiration of neoclassical models as eternal standards, instead of seeing aesthetic conventions as historically relative. Pope's observations in the *Essay on Criticism* and in his "Preface to Shakespeare", although they do not amount to a historicist perspective, show some degree of historical consciousness.

Finally, to understand an author we need to understand his intentions. Few would disagree with that now, but in Pope this hides a further assumption: that the author cannot accomplish more than he intends. That is, that art is conscious and wilful; all must "stoop to what they understand." This is again the old Horatian idea that writing well comes from thinking well, and that writers must measure their strength before attempting certain subjects. But Hobbes's empiricist principle that "only that must be written which is perfectly understood" is not far away. And with this we can no longer agree in this age of Marxist, Structuralist and Freudian thought, where much of our

behavior, even in writing literature, is accounted for by means of unconscious ideologies and hidden drives.

Like Hobbes and Dryden, Pope mistrusts imagination: it misleads understanding, and only understanding, judgement, can make a successful work of art for him. Judgement makes a writer follow nature, which is always the same for Pope. Following nature means understanding the rules and writing according to them. This is because Pope sees the rules as a product of Nature; they are a self-imposed restraint:

3.

Those rules of old discovered, not devised,

Are nature still, but nature methodized:

Nature, like liberty, is but restrained

By the same laws which first herself ordained.

And, as the Ancients were the ones who followed the rules best, "To copy nature is to copy them." For Pope, there is no possible difference between experience and imitation; here he is thoroughly neoclassical in the narrowest sense. He sees culture (the rules) as a part of nature, while the pre-Romantic writers of the XVIIIth century have a primitivistic tendency; they see nature as something which man has alienated himself from through culture. Nature and rule, nature and culture, nature and manners, become then opposite terms. For Pope, nature and manners are nearly synonymous.

However, Pope is not only inspired by Horace, but by Longinus as well, the "critic with a poet's fire," the most romantic of classical critics. He recognises that there are beauties which cannot be reduced to rule:

4.

Some beauties yet no precept can declare

For there is a happiness as well as care

5.

Music resembles poetry; in each

Are nameless graces which no methods teach.

Sometimes, "license is a rule." And it is true that Pope comes close at times to the Longinian admiration of sublimity which can jump over the rules guided by genius alone. The rules must be respected, but they can be occasionally broken:

6.

Great wits sometimes may gloriously offend

And rise to faults true critics dare not mend.

But this is a risky thing to attempt, and Pope seems to be trying to justify the ancients everywhere while keeping the moderns within the boundary of rule.

Another piece of advice is to learn to judge the work as a whole, and not its isolated parts; to appreciate the true merits of a work, and not the superficial

ornaments like good sound or a good style with no content. The harmony between sound and sense finds in Pope's view its most finished instance in the figure of *imitative harmony* :

7.

'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense;

The sound must seem an echo to the sense .

Soft is the strain when zephyr gently blows,

And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;

But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,

The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar:

Whe Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,

The line too labours, and the words move slow.

Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,

Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along the main.

Here Pope takes care to exemplify in his own poem the effects or defects he wants to point out, in bad poets, with examples of imitative verse on monosyllabic lines, hiatus or bad rhyme:

8.

These equal syllables alone require,

Though oft' the ear the open vowels tire;

While expletives their feeble aid do join

And ten low words oft' creep in one dull line:

While they ring round the same unvaried chimes,

With sure returns of still expected lines

Where'er you find "the cooling western breeze"

In the next line, it "whispers through the trees"

If crystal streams "with pleasing murmurs creep"

The reader's threatened (not in vain) with "sleep"

These lines seem to imply that poetry must avoid clichés and that one of the worst enemies of poetry is bad poetry, or even predictable poetry. Poetry should surprise with its wit and its innovative use of words and images.

Pope tries to practice what he preaches. Every principle and commonplace of criticism is given a witty and catchy formulation, and we may feel that Pope's own *Essay on Criticism* follows his requirement for "true wit":

9.

True wit is nature to advantage dressed

What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.

... something. ...

That gives us back the image of our mind.

Wit, then, is the crown of nature, and not something alien to it. This definition of wit, with its peculiar setting of familiarity against novelty, can be traced to a Horatian source, but it was criticised by Samuel Johnson, who believed that Pope has reduced "wit" from strength of thought to happiness of language. But this is not Pope's doing: the term was already evolving from its original meaning towards a lighter and more frivolous one.

Nevertheless, Pope's neoclassical concepts are too limited to allow a real analysis of poetic effect. Form is not important in itself, Pope says, but only with respect to subject matter: "Expression is the dress of thought" and so it must be *suitable*, not uniformly bright,

10.

For different styles with different subjects sort

As several garbs with country, town, and court.

Pope's sartorial metaphors have often been criticised, because they betray him into denying what he is trying to assert: that there is an organic relationship between style and content. Defining style as a dress, as something which exists apart from the thing it covers, is not the best way to do it, but we must note that Pope is very careful in not using too much the word "ornamental" (cf. Dryden, *Spratt and the decay of rhetoric*), and he takes care in his poetry not to be too much "ornamental." Anyway, the definition of language as a kind of dress for thought is not Pope's own: it is commonplace until the Romantic age, when it will be severely criticised.

Just as Horace and Boileau had written a short history of literature, Pope ends his *Essay* with a short history of criticism, and he ends his essay with the hope that "wit's fundamental laws" will take root in England, a country

which has bravely resisted the invasion of culture. He sees in Boileau the summit of modern criticism, and lets us conclude that he himself is the cornerstone of English criticism-which he was.

Chapter Three

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)



Johnson was a poet, biographer, lexicographer, and an essayist on criticism and morals (*The Rambler*, *The Idler* ; he was the most influential literary figure of his lifetime in England, and he is the hero of one of the most acclaimed biographies ever written, his friend Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* .

Johnson is the last important critic of the neoclassicism, in an age where pre-Romantic ideas are more widely accepted than neoclassicism. **Johnson is usually less dogmatic and more eclectic than Pope in his assertion of the neoclassical values.** Moreover, sometimes Johnson's claims are contradictory: for instance, he wants at once realism and poetic justice on stage. He is not a consistent theorist, but rather a practical critic of penetrating insights, honesty and common sense. In Johnson we can witness both the dead weight of a tradition and the signs that a new conception of literature is emerging. Johnson had a strongly classical mind, and a great desire for order and coherence. But he had very little patience with whatever he perceived to be false, useless or pretentious, and he made short work of many neoclassical prejudices. He has become an emblematic character

among literary critics, as a personification of English common sense and distrust of vague abstractions or fantastic theoretical systems. One anecdote told by Boswell exemplifies this hard-core common sense, with both its advantages and its limitations. The following anecdote from Boswell exemplifies this hard-headed no-nonsense theory, which has its limitations as well as its virtues:

1. After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it *thus*." (Boswell 162)

A large part of Johnson's criticism consists in rejecting what he sees as logical absurdities both in criticism or in literature. His common sense leads him sometimes into narrowness, because he tends to interpret poetical or critical conventions too literally; no doubt he also does away with a lot of nonsense and rubbish.

One main critical statement is the preface to his edition of Shakespeare's works. His judgement on Shakespeare is similar to Dryden's. He recognises his greatness in spite of being unable to reduce him to his principles, and in spite of his admiration is often narrow in judging him: he complains that Shakespeare is not moral enough, that he cares so much to please and to portray life that he seems at times to be writing without moral purpose. He also complains that Shakespeare has no sense of geography or history, and too often puts high-sounding speeches in situations where they are out of

tune. And he has a pernicious love for puns which makes him spoil his best effects. Shakespeare is ready to abandon all artistic purpose for the sake of wordplay. Besides, he adds, Shakespeare's plays are incorrectly designed and he does not submit to decorum. But Shakespeare remains the greatest: with all his defects, he is a force of nature which no careful writer has hope to surpass.

However, Johnson was the one who rejected once and for all the doctrine of the unities; Shakespeare, he says, was right in paying no attention to them. Johnson rejects classical dramatic doctrine in the name of common sense, the same common sense that was said by Dryden and Pope to have established it. He maintains the unity of action, but sacrifices the unities of time and place to the higher pleasures of variety and instruction, which are best attained without them. He also accepts tragicomedy, as being more pleasurable than both tragedy and comedy, and having the same didactic potential. "I am almost frightened at my own temerity," Johnson says.

His main work in practical criticism is found in *The Lives of the Poets* (1777), dealing with Savage, Cowley, Milton, Gray, Dryden and Pope, among many others. There is a balance of biography and criticism in this work, as Johnson is interested not merely in the poet, but in the man as a whole. This is already revealing of a new attitude towards poetic creation. We may note that he is sound enough while writing on neoclassical poets, seeing their defects as well as their merits, but that his prejudices as a Royalist make him undervalue Gray, who was a democrat and a pre-Romantic, and Milton, a Puritan and regicide.

Didacticism is still important for Johnson. Fiction he defines as "truth invested with falsehood." Witness also his definition of poetry:

2. Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason.

In an essay on fiction Johnson grounds critical judgement on morality. Realism can be dangerous if it is not moral. Not everything in nature is fit for representation: art must imitate only those parts of nature which are fit for imitation. The artist must polish real life and offer us an ideal image. Vice, if it is shown, must inspire disgust.

In his novel *Rasselas*, Johnson further develops his ideas on imitation:

3. The business of a poet . . . is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind.

The poet must not only have a wide knowledge, but also magnify his attention to have an increased perception of similarities in nature; they must be free of prejudice and must be able to rise to eternal and transcendent truths.

4. He must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superior to time and place. (328).

In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, Johnson asserts that

5. Nothing can please many, or please long, but just representations of general nature. (330)

Shakespeare is a "faithful mirror of manners and of life," but what he shows are not particular manners: he depicts not the individual, but the species. This idea has of course a long Aristotelian and neo-Platonic ancestry; it is being strongly emphasized at the time by Reynolds in his discourses on the theory of painting (*Discourses on Art*, 1770-86). Poets or painters should concern themselves with the representation of "general nature", rather than particular experience; oddities or personal whims (*Tristram Shandy* is one of Johnson's examples) will not do. Particulars are that which is limited to a given age or place (Johnson : the Puritans in Butler's *Hudibras*). Universal is that which is common to all ages and countries. In opposing the elaborate conceits of the metaphysical poets, Johnson asserts that "great thoughts are always general." The passage describing "metaphysical wit" is one of the best-known passages in the English critical tradition:

6.Wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, [the metaphysical poets] have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. (*Life of Cowley*).

Sublimity or greatness in poetry is for Johnson dependent on essentials, and not to details (cf. Longinus against picturesque detail as detracting from sublimity). This is opposed to the ideals of the Romantic critics that will follow immediately after him. The Romantics would rather insist on dwelling on particular experience and on minute detail as its proof. But in fact the

opposition is less acute than it looks at first sight: the neoclassical standard of universality, of "general nature," is never well defined; it subsumes many different concepts (ideality, actual frequency, intelligibility, essence, etc.). Johnson's "species" or generality which must be examined by the poet is not a Platonic universal, but rather a generalization from the average sense experiences. This we must associate to his demand that the poet have an encyclopedical knowledge, and write free from the prejudice of his age and nation. While for the neo-Platonics the knowledge of general ideas is achieved through some kind of direct inspiration, through their inborn presence in the mind of the poet, Johnson insists on the need of long experience in the world before being able to deal with general truths. This is in the spirit of empiricism. His reaction against the rules, too, is in the spirit of empiricism: here he appreciates "nature" over "convention", and opposes those critics who can't distinguish between the two.

Johnson is remarkably sensitive to the feelings of the public. His discussions of drama are usually grounded on the feelings or effects of the audience: he says that the difference between a tragedy or a comedy depends on their effect, not their structure. Johnson thinks that the common public is usually right on issues which have been long debated. Even his own definition of wit, the one he prefers over metaphysical wit, is dependent on general consensus and common experience:

7. If by a more noble and more adequate conception that be considered as wit which is at once natural and new, that which, though not obvious, is, upon its first production, acknowledged to be just; if it be that which he that never found it wonders how he missed, to wit of this kind the metaphysical poets have seldom risen.

Johnson may have endorsed the principles of Neoclassicism, but in reality he is a transitional critic, and he is not alien to the influence that empiricist philosophy has on critical thought in this age. And his personal taste often reveals a sensitivity towards detail, the picturesque and the individual (for example, biography and personal morality, as opposed to philosophy) which appears obscured in his theories. There is often a gap between Johnson's theoretical concepts and his actual critical judgements: his judgements seem to be independent of the theories he is supposed to be applying. For instance, he repeats the traditional Neoclassic view of style as ornament. He defends the ideas of different levels of style, of specifically poetic diction. But in practice he also holds a different, more modern conception of style. In Johnson's practical criticism, style is seen as a way of perceiving the world. This can be seen above all in his rejections of poetic clichés and worn-out, trite expressions which derive from previous literature and not from personal experience.

This is in the line of the general shift from a conceptual, taxonomic view of style (that best exemplified by Ramism) to the perceptual, experiential view of literature which is foreshadowed in the concern of the late 17th century for a more intelligible and persuasive oratorical style, a view which is developed by the aestheticians of the 18th century and surfaces in the Romantic movement. Poetry makes familiar things new and new things familiar (Cf. Horace, but Wordsworth and Shklovski too) by creating an image of a mind in action. Johnson says that art is imitation, and that we can imitate either the object perceived or the process of perception. His criticism of the metaphysical poets is that their works imitate neither the object nor its impression. This "mimetic principle" is often used by Johnson as a criterion of unity, when he is opposing the intrusion of mannered styles.

So, Johnson is superficially a neoclassical critic, above all in his explicit theoretical statements. But in his personal taste and his practical criticism, we can see that he is in fact a transitional critic, just like many others which will be dealt with now. "His stylistic criticism, and probably in some degree his personal taste, reveal the strain of a contradiction which he did not perceive." This is to a certain extent the contradiction of his age; we will see now the emergence of this new literary standard in the esthetic thought of many other writers apart from Johnson.

Chapter four

18th-Century Aesthetics

4.5.1. Introduction

4.5.2. Joseph Addison

4.5.3. Edmund Burke

4.5.4. David Hume

4.5.5. G. E. Lessing

4.5.6. Immanuel Kant

4.5.1. Introduction

We are going to deal now with a different aspect of eighteenth-century criticism: the pre-romantic elements. Pre-romanticism is largely contemporaneous with neoclassicism in England, and provides a complementary perspective. Pre-romantic tendencies became dominant towards the second half of the eighteenth century. The difference between the neoclassical and the pre-romantic aesthetic could be summarized thus:

Neoclassical Pre-romantic

Conceptually based Perceptually based

Taxonomic Experiential

Abstract and general Subjectivist

Rational Emotional

In many of Johnson's contemporaries the shift from the traditional, conceptual, neoclassic standards to a new cognitive and perceptual grounding of literature is clearer than in Johnson himself, because they are less concerned with classical theory and more with the actual experience of the audience. Pre-romantic aesthetics are often linked to the influence of Locke's empiricist philosophy. Elements of empiricist pre-romanticism can be found in Addison, Hume, Burke, Alexander Gerard, Lord Kames, Joseph Priestley, Hugh Blair, James Beattie, Edward Young, Richard Hurd, Joseph Warton, Archibald Alison and Adam Smith (also the founder of political economy). Their theories are *aesthetic*, that is to say, they deal with the object as it is perceived, and *sentimentalist*: they are concerned above all with the emotions awakened in the receiver. Empiricist critics place the source of aesthetic emotion in fancy, not in the judgement of the audience. They are not too much concerned with the moral value of art; they are trying rather to explain the *pleasure* produced by art, a pleasure without any pretensions to deep meaning. Addison affirms that aesthetic pleasures do not have any cognitive value. The French critic Du Bos holds that reading poetry is different in motive from reading history or any genre concerned with practical teaching. Poetry is appreciated by its style rather than its teaching. The main end of literature for the empirical critics is to please. Poetry has somehow retreated from its pretensions to rational knowledge. Sometimes, they include teaching in their definitions, but only as a *means*. Or moral value is present only in a shadowy way: Shaftesbury speaks of the refinement of the moral sensibility which is effected through taste. Even when an ultimate moral value is still recognized, pleasing is said to be the end which differentiates literature as such among the belles-lettres. Warton, Gerard, Hurd and Twining are downright hedonists: not the first, however, since hedonism had already appeared in the theories of Castelvetro, Cowley,

Temple, St. Evremond and sometimes Dryden. But for the first time we find a whole school that does not take for granted the need of direct moral instruction in fiction. We find instead a theory of the so-called "moral sense" (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Gerard, Kames). This sense is seen as distinct from judgement or knowledge: it is rather a question of feelings, of emotions, which are believed to be moral in themselves. Here we have a crude theory of the unconscious influence of literature (already foreshadowed in the "sugared pill" theory, which however was never really taken seriously). Literature may educate our morals, but it is by acting on our emotions, not on our judgement. Johnson himself always insists on the role of judgement in the perception and comprehension of a work; in this sense he is more classical than these critics.

So, we have on the one hand the traditional, neoclassical, conceptual standard: a work has unity because it is subject to a design transmitted by literary tradition, and its style is correct because it is the style generally accepted by this tradition to deal with a given subject. On the other hand we have the perceptual standard: form and style are an organic growth which is transmitted to the work from the direct experience of the subject, the artist, the writer. The work has order because it reflects an orderly process of thought. Critical thought in the 18th century had come to rely more on the latter, on rule, imitation and tradition, while the latter was more organically related to the philosophy and the taste of the time and formed an undercurrent which will become the romantic reaction against neoclassicism. Poetry will no longer be seen as ornamented language, "ornament" is rather the necessary reflection of an individual sensibility and mode of conceiving.

We find throughout the Neoclassical age an underlying opposition between elaborate styles and natural styles (the standard classical *locus* being the opposition between Lysias vs. Demosthenes). Dryden, Pope and Johnson view Shakespeare as a somewhat savage and disorderly product of nature, but they recognize his greatness and abundance. Johnson said that "Corneille is to Shakespeare as a clipped hedge is to a forest." Johnson, particularly, argues that elaborate styles estrange the poet from an immediate knowledge of nature and prevent his reaching the highest effects of art. Johnson draws an opposition between clear minds and minds distorted by "wit" and verbal elaboration, like Cowley. "Refinement entails a departure from the intuitive level of experience" (Edinger 170). He is against learned styles: poetry must not be a discursive, but a *dramatic* communication of experience.

We may link this insistence on feeling to some ideas of the 17th-century libertines (Bouhours, La Bruyère, St. Evremond, and in England, Sir William Temple) who had opposed learning through rules and favoured instead learning through experience (Rousseau will develop these ideas much further in *Emile*). They oppose "art," and favour the natural ease of style and energy, and they oppose "false wit" which plays with words having nothing to do with the experience of the object they are dealing with. These ideas will become more and more diffused during the eighteenth century. Sublimity or pathos are often said to proceed from the representation of subjective states of consciousness. The same emphasis is found in France in Arnauld's *Port-Royal Logic*: the orator must offer an image of the things "which not only represents the things barely as they are, but also the Motions and Affections with which they are conceived." The expressive function of language is valued alongside with the referential one.

Connotation and its conceptual opposition to denotation are also emphasized. Rhetorical figures are accepted by Arnauld and Addison as a kind of mark of subjective feeling; they add an element of connotation to the denotative meaning of words. The terms "connotation" and "denotation" themselves are not used as yet, but a distinction similar to this between "principal" and "accessory" meanings of words is also found in Fénelon, Johnson or Wordsworth. Adam Smith inverts the traditional relationship between figures and beauty of expression. Beauty comes from a sentiment of sympathy; figures will follow spontaneously. Reynolds himself distinguishes between a style in which words are used as means and another one in which words are used as ends in themselves: this is understood to be a vicious use.

Genius and originality is valued early enough by British critics such as John Dennis (*The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*, 1701) and Edward Young ("Conjectures on Original Composition," 1759), together with Johnson himself, who points out that nobody was ever great by imitation. Gerard and Dennis advise the poet to feel passion, so that he may have the same associations of ideas as his classical models. There is a renewal of interest in the inspirational theories of *Ion* and in the criticism of Longinus.

The corresponding emotion on the side of the audience is *ecstasis*, a strong emotion of transport. Catharsis is now understood as a purifying and exalting of the emotions, in a rather sentimental way. This conception is linked to the Cartesian idea of the emotions in art, which considered them a useful exercise for the soul, an exercise which is safe because of the imitative nature of the passions awakened by art. But rationalism does not develop an influential aesthetics, and so it is the empiricist theories that flourish. This we may link to Locke's view of language: words do not convey ideas:

they *excite* ideas. There is an insistence here on connotation, of that element in meaning which is linked to some particular experience; all this foreshadows romantic ideas. [Locke's An Essay Concerning Human Understanding](#) (above all, the later editions containing the doctrine of association, ca. 1700) provides the philosophical basis for this perceptual revolution against rhetoric; his distinction between primary and secondary (or subjective) qualities of objects, as well as his conception of the human mind and its associational processes are behind the aesthetic speculations of Addison or Burke. Associationism is also used in textual analysis; it is applied, for instance, to Hamlet's monologue, to the study of synecdoche (Addison) or as a theme and an organizing principle to the novel by Sterne. There is an urge to develop a connection between aesthetics and science: Burke and Hume will try to find a universal standard of taste; the effects on the receiver are sometimes explained in a mechanical way (according to Burke, beauty works by "relaxing the solids of the system"; Kames presents a similar mechanical model in his *Elements of Criticism* [1762]). Alison affirms that poetical descriptions are beautiful in proportion to their power to stimulate associations charged with emotion. The apparent non-analyzability of aesthetic emotions will lead some critics to postulate an internal aesthetic sense, simple, ultimate and infallible, after the model of Shaftesbury's "moral sense" (Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 1725).

4.5.2. Joseph Addison (1672-1729)

Addison may be considered as the first of the English aestheticians in the sense that he is interested above all on the effect of the work on the reader. He wrote in *The Spectator* (1712) a series of essays "On the Pleasures of the Imagination." We may note that among these aestheticians *imagination* is

becoming a more important critical concept, and *wit* is less important ("wit," being linked to words, not to things, is an *extrinsic* way of invention). Imagination, or fancy, is the combination and alteration of memories. If this is done through a work of art, Addison speaks of "**secondary imagination**," the primary being that effected by the mind alone. "**Secondary pleasures**" come from a comparison between the ideas awakened by the original and those aroused by the imitation. Artistic imitation is most pleasing when it approaches nature; and nature is most pleasing when it approaches art. The role of the poet is an important one; he heightens and enlivens nature: Addison conceives this as a kind of directing the attention of the reader. But the role of the reader is also important, because his imagination and his judgement are also in question in the perception of the work. Descriptions please in two ways: as imitations, and as the object described. Descriptions of bad or disagreeable things may still please as descriptions; those of good things both as descriptions and as the object described. Actually, there are three kinds of objects proper for imitation: beautiful, great or uncommon objects (cf. the distinction which will become common later in the 18th between the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque). The best objects, Addison says, are those that work on the passions of the reader, exciting them in a way that becomes pleasurable because it is recognized as secondary, not the real thing. The pleasures of imagination are less gross than those of sense and less refined than those of the understanding. Every man should develop the sphere of his innocent pleasures to its widest, Addison believes. But he favours a "light" and "lazy" aesthetics, valuing real resemblances more than metaphorical ones, and rejecting the metaphysical conceit because it represents "*too violent a labour for the brain.*"

Addison's classification of the arts sees sculpture as being the nearest to the object represented, the most concrete; painting follows, and then

description. Music is the most abstract. Classifications such as this one will become almost standard during the eighteenth century and the romantic age, and will receive a philosophical backing: romantic thinkers will say that some arts are more objective and others (poetry and music among them) more subjective.

4.5.3. Edmund Burke (1729-1797)

Burke was an important writer in the fields of law and political theory. His main work on aesthetics is *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

Sublimity: The concept of the sublime becomes fashionable again in the eighteenth century, with the revival of Longinus. Boileau, in his *Réflexions sur Longin*, concluded that sublimity came only from Longinus' five possible causes of sublimity working together (great ideas, passion, use of figurative language, a careful composition). In English criticism, the concept of the sublime as opposed to beauty had been introduced by Dennis, and many others followed. "Sublime" is applied in two main senses: either to the genius of the poet who goes beyond the rules (cf. fashion of inspirationalism, Dennis' *passion* and Young's defense of original genius in his "Conjectures on Original Composition") or to some object which is big, irregular, frightening and surprising in an agreeable way. The ideas of irregularity and excess are present in both. For Burke, the sublime is linked to an excitement coming from terrible objects which produce strong emotions. In order to enjoy the excitement of sublimity, the observer must preserve some distance from these objects and feel secure from danger. As the Roman poet Lucretius said, it is pleasant to watch the power of a storm in the sea only if we are on firm ground, not from a sinking ship.

Beauty: According to Burke, a sense of beauty is proper to man; it is "*a social quality* ." It is linked to feelings of tenderness and affection. Burke feels unable to explain the end of beauty; he believes that it answers to a mysterious divine design.

Comparison:

The sublime Beauty

Individual Social

Vast Comparatively small

Rugged Polished

Right line or Insensible shunning of right strong deviation line

from it

Dark and gloomy Clear

Solid and massive Light and delicate.

They may appear united sometimes, Burke admits, but they are opposed principles.

Burke establishes a similar dichotomy in his discussion of style. Burke defines the opposite concepts of a "clear expression" which transmits things naturally, as they are, and a "strong expression" which transmits rather a thing *as it is felt* , that is, in such a way that it will act on the passions, and not the judgement, of the audience. We see here again the opposition between an objective and a subjectively mediated use of language. To affect the audience, Burke argues, we must transmit not so much the object (affection

by imitation) as the way it affects a perceiver (affection by sympathy). He believes that a poetry of the emotions cannot be considered to be an art of imitation: Sir William Jones will soon use the word "expression" in this new sense: "music and poetry are expressive of the passions and operate in our mind by sympathy."

Taste: Burke believes that some kind of foundation can be established for a standard of taste. Taste he defines as "those faculties of the mind, which are affected by, or which form a judgement of, the works of imagination and the elegant arts" (303). He opposes the idea of taste as a separate faculty of the mind, different from imagination and judgement. Taste is a compound of the primary pleasures of sense, the secondary pleasures of the imagination and the conclusion coming from reason. Imagination is incapable of producing anything completely new, and things which are pleasurable to sense are more or less the same for all men, apart from the few variations which may be introduced by culture and custom. The same happens with imagination, whose works are a combination of sense data. The *essence* of taste is similar in all men, although they experience it in widely different *degrees*. So, Burke concludes, "The cause of a wrong taste is a defect of judgment."

4.5.4. David Hume (1711-1776)

Hume tried, like Burke, to develop a standard of taste ("Of the Standard of Taste," 1757). He saw great difficulties: "Beauty", he says, "is not a quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind that contemplates them" (315). But he was unwilling to accept the total subjectivism and relativism of taste. Our common sense tells us that some tastes are absurd, so we are supposing a certain standard, even if it is a vague one. "Hume seems to propose a certain state of mind as the source of the standard of taste "

(Adams 313). The standard is at its clearest when a mind free of prejudice and accustomed to judgement considers the aesthetic qualities of an object taking into account nothing but the object itself. Like Pope before him, Hume voices here the ideal neutrality favoured by humanist criticism of the bourgeois era-one which will be questioned by the ideological criticism of our century.

4.5.5. G. E. Lessing (1729-1781)

The term "aesthetic" means originally "sensitive", "related to perception." It was first used during the XVIII with reference to the study of the beautiful, of fine arts (in the *Aesthetics* of the German critic Baumgarten, 1750). Two important ideas here: the role of the receiver and his experience, and the search for a common grounds to aesthetic feelings and to the different arts.

There is a growing interest in the eighteenth century in the possibility of tracing the common elements of the different arts. A classical motto of the Greek poet Simonides becomes now popular: he had defined poetry as a speaking picture, and painting as silent poetry. This idea is not isolated: it can be related to the Platonic, Aristotelian and Horatian comparisons between poetry and painting. Horace's *ut pictura poesis* is taken out of its context and magnified: poetry and painting are now dealt with as if their subjects and techniques were the same. Aristotle's analogy between sketching and the designing of plots is put to good use: colour, the specifically pictorial element, is disdained (cf. Locke's "secondary qualities") and the emphasis is on figure and meaning. Now, the theory of painting makes a special emphasis on the use of allegory, which is a common element to both arts. Conversely, there is a fashion of descriptive or pictorial poetry. The common grounds of poetry and painting are pointed out by Du Bos, Du

Fresnay's *Arte Graphica* and Dryden's *Parallel between Poetry and Painting*, (1695). This tendency will become in time a general movement which tends to look for analogies between the arts, with the side effect of occasionally blurring the differences between them. Wimsatt and Brooks point out the strange paradox by which painting was turned into the critical standard to measure poetry, while literary standards were applied to painting. The influence of pictorial theory on literature was non-intellectual, sensitive, while that of literary theory on painting was a kind of misapplied intellectualization. But the idea of an analogy between the arts goes beyond its more obvious limitations in eighteenth-century theory. All arts have a common source, genius, and a similar ideal of perfection in form and aesthetic elevation of the audience as their end. It is a typical impressionistic, subjective and Romantic kind of criticism, and it will gain strength during the Romantic period (cf. Wagner's ideal of the total work of art) in spite of some voices which pointed out the essential differences between the arts, rather than their similarities. The tendency to draw analogies between the arts may be represented in the mid-eighteenth century by the antiquarians J. J. Winckelmann (*On the Imitation of Greek Art in Painting and Sculpture*, 1754), Cayllus (*Tableaux tirés de l'Iliade, de l'Odyssée d'Homère et de l'Enéide de Virgile*, 1758) and Joseph Spence (*Polymetis*, 1747).

Lessing reacts against these theorists and against the extravagances of the analogy. He is a classicist and an Aristotelian, but a flexible one, not unlike Dryden in the English tradition: he recognises that the limits of the art are wider now than in classical Greece (for instance, in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy* he will react against the prevailing French brand of classicism, asking for a national German drama after the model of Shakespeare and the English theatre).

Lessing affirms that the classics knew that the arts have to be differentiated by their objects of imitation, as well as by their media, and complains that his contemporaries want to imprison poetry within the narrow limits of painting. By "poetry" he means literature in general, and by "painting" all the plastic arts. His emphasis is on the essential differences between literature and the plastic arts, not on the analogies. This is the subject of his main work, *Laocoon: or, on the limits of poetry and painting*. Painting cannot imitate successive actions: only simultaneous ones. The proper object of painting is forms, physical bodies. On the other hand, poetry is not the best way of depicting forms: rather, it is concerned with actions which unfold in time. Poetry, then, is an art of time, while painting is an art of space. This difference comes from the very signs which are used in poetical or pictorial representation. The signs of poetry unfold in time, those of painting in space. Of course, Lessing says, the limits of poetry and painting are not here: painting can imitate actions through the imitation of bodies, and poetry can imitate forms to a certain extent through action, through a description of the objects as they are used or manufactured-but in a more limited way than painting.

Moreover, the signs used by painting are natural, and those used by poetry (linguistic signs) are conventional (a difference already noted by Du Bos). Lessing foresees one possible objection now. If the signs of poetry are arbitrary, they are not necessarily linked to actions; they could as well represent bodies as they exist in space. But, Lessing answers, this will be less vivid than a representation of actions. Poetry cannot give an overview of the whole of spatial distribution in the way painting can (though it can add other kinds of sensory impressions apart from visual ones). The proper organization for a descriptive poem is a series of feelings to which descriptions are added, not a series of descriptions to which feelings are

added. Literature, then, is more subjective than painting. Lessing rejects the extremities of allegory in painting and visual description in poetry. Poetry cannot depict physical beauty in the way painting can. Painting has to offer a definite image; poetry will have to suggest beauty without definite descriptions, and let each reader imagine the object after his own ideals. Painting, for Lessing, cannot use artistically the images of ugly objects. Poetry has wider limits in this sense: it has the privilege of representing anger, sadness and ugliness; it can deal with a wider range of subjects, of human actions and feelings; its limits are at the same time *different* from those of painting and *wider* than them.

4.5.6. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

4.5.6.1. Kant's Philosophical Aesthetics

4.5.6.2. Transcendental Analysis of the Judgement of Beauty

4.5.6.3. Beauty and Sublimity

4.5.6.4. Art

4.5.6.5. Kant's Influence

4.5.6.1. Kant's Philosophical Aesthetics

Kant is not a critic or theorist of literature, but a philosopher who is driven to deal with aesthetics as a necessary component of his philosophy. It is the inner necessity of his system which demands an aesthetic theory. Indeed, he is the first philosopher in whose work aesthetics is a fundamental component (Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida will follow suit).

Kant had made an early approach to aesthetics in his treatise *Considerations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), but his main work in this area is the late *Critique of Judgement* (1790). In this work, artistic experience is viewed as a kind of conciliation of the worlds of knowledge and morality, or of necessity and freedom, which had been separated by Kant in his two earlier great works, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).

As a philosopher, Kant represents the conciliation of rationalism (Descartes-Spinoza-Leibniz-Wolff) with empiricism (Locke-Berkeley-Hume) in a new kind of philosophy, which he will say is not dogmatic but *transcendental*. We have to differentiate Kant's *transcendental idealism* from later "dogmatic" interpretations. That is, his philosophy is a theory of knowledge, and only in this sense it is also a theory of reality. Transcendental philosophy is an analysis of experience: it starts from the recognition of an act of knowing and goes on to inquire into the conditions which determine its possibility; it will find that moral knowledge is not the same as aesthetic knowledge or scientific knowledge. It is not, however, a psychological theory: Kant always traces a sharp division between the psychological and the transcendental interpretation. The transcendental interpretation deals not with actual knowledge, but with *a priori* principles, with the conditions which determine the very possibility of knowledge. For instance, in the area of perception, it shows how our sensitive experience takes place in the *a priori* molds of space and time; in the area of pure reason, it determines the way in which our understanding unifies the infinite variety of experience under the *categories* or pure ordering concepts by means of a judgement. Just as we cannot experience something without the categories of space and time, so we cannot think without casting our thought into the categories. For instance, "unity," "plurality," "totality," are the categories of *quantity*; there

are also other categories of *quality*, *relation*, and *modality*. In any synthesis of experiences we necessarily subsume sense impressions under one or more of these concepts.

Kant makes a difference between the *understanding* or *pure reason* (a logical, discursive faculty which is able to organize impressions into knowledge) and *practical reason* (which does not deal with phenomena, with sensible impressions, but with *noumena* or the postulated, unknowable "things-in-themselves"; it may be usefully related to Shaftesbury's "moral sense"). The world of morality cannot be deduced from the world of phenomena: moral imperatives are not deduced from experience but from a "categorical imperative." The word of nature and the world of moral behaviour are separate.

But Kant saw that the first two critiques did not exhaust the area of transcendental philosophy. He had deduced *a priori* principles for knowledge in the world of phenomena and knowledge in the world of morality (faculty of knowing and faculty of desiring), but there is still one area of knowledge which cannot be reduced to any of them, and whose own *a priori* principles must be deduced separately, in a third *Critique* (the feeling of pleasure or disgust). With these principles of its own, art re-creates both nature and morality, opening a new area for culture. Kant believes that there is a peculiar kind of content to the aesthetic experience (both artistic and natural) which cannot be reduced to the principles of understanding or morality, that is, which has its own *a priori* principles.

We can see here the source of Edgar Allan Poe's three worlds of the human soul: that of knowledge, that of morals and that of art in between (indeed, the essentials of this conception can be found in Mendelssohn before they

are developed by Kant). But note that Poe (and many other aesthetes in the 19th century) are calling for the idea of a pure artistic experience, independent from knowledge or morality. This does not make much sense in Kant, who is abstracting art from knowledge and reason only because of his transcendental purpose. Pure beauty, for Kant, is comparatively trivial, even if it does exist. What is important in Kant is precisely that art forms in some way a bridge between the concepts of nature and those of morality. And the subjects proposed by Poe he would not call instances of pure ("free") beauty, from the moment there is a human interest in them ("adherent" beauty, limited by a concept of what the object is supposed to be intended for). It is true that Kant declares in some way the independence of art from morals and knowledge, but it is, if we may say so, an *essential*, not an *existential* independence.

4.5.6.2. Transcendental analysis of the judgement of beauty

Kant analyzes the aesthetic judgement of beauty from the point of view of each kind of categories (of quantity, quality, modality and relation).

According to **relation**: This *a priori* basis for the analysis of aesthetic experience Kant looks for in the idea of *finality*. The foundation of aesthetic pleasure is the perception of a finality in things, the feeling that they answer a purpose. But the aesthetic finality is a kind of empty finality, a finality without an object, that is, a *finality without end*, a *purposiveness without a purpose* (*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*). The finality is not to be found in the object, but in the state of the contemplating mind itself, which enters into a state of free play of the imagination. Aesthetic pleasure, then comes from a kind of pure play of the ability of judging, a delight in its own activity and in the consciousness of a harmony between imagination and judgement. There

is also pleasure coming from the sense of freedom from a utilitarian necessity. "Beauty is the form of the *finality* of an object insofar as it is perceived in the object *without the representation of an end*." (I, § 17). Kant concludes from this that "To look for a principle of taste which offers a universal criterion of beauty, by means of certain concepts, is an useless task, because what it is seeking is a thing impossible and contradictory in itself" (I, § 17).

According to **quality**: Aesthetic judgements are not objective: they do not discover any qualities in the object, they do not help us to know its properties better; they refer to the subject and to a feeling which the representation awakens in him. In practical reason, the judgement is based on an imperative. Here no such imperative exists: beauty is perceived in a pure and disinterested contemplation. "TASTE is the faculty of judging an object or a representation with a feeling of satisfaction or disgust, *without any interest whatsoever*. The object of such a satisfaction is called *beautiful*." (I, § 5). Here Kant opposes the disinterestedness of beauty to the interest which is present both in sensitive pleasure (the *agreeable*) and in morals (*goodness*). The distinction between the beautiful and the agreeable can be traced back to Plato or St. Thomas, but it comes more directly from Burke, and will be inherited by Coleridge. The beautiful is not (necessarily) *agreeable* nor *good* : it is only beautiful. Rationalism had tended to identify beauty and goodness, while empiricism leaned towards the identification of the beautiful and the agreeable. Idealism, Kant says, keeps the three clearly apart, making beauty independent from morals or sense.

According to **quantity**: The aesthetic judgement of beauty is *universal* . The aesthetic judgement of beauty is also special in that it is not based on

concepts, like the judgements of pure reason: in pure reason, judgements link a representation and a concept; the aesthetic judgement of beauty links the representation directly with the feeling of the observer. Here, the aesthetic judgement of beauty agrees with the aesthetic judgement of the agreeable. The aesthetic judgement of the agreeable, however, is not universal: we recognize that different people may have different taste in this respect. But in spite of its subjectivity, the aesthetic judgement of beauty has pretensions of universality: in some way, we objectify our feeling and declare that the beautiful object is a source of necessary pleasure. We feel that everyone should find beautiful objects beautiful. Kant calls this a "pretension to subjective universality " (I, § 6).

According to **modality**: Beautiful things not only must please everybody: they please necessarily. That is because in making these aesthetic judgements, we suppose the existence of a "common sense" as a regulative principle which makes their communicability possible. "Beautiful is that which, without a concept, is known as the object of a *necessary* satisfaction" (I, § 22)

Art has principles of its own, but no contents of its own, says Kant. Rather, it uses the contents proper to pure reason (nature) and practical reason (morality) and relates them to one another, presenting nature as if it were subjected to morality and morality as if it were nature. In this way art effects a kind of imaginary conciliation of the two spheres of human activity. There is no necessary connection between art and morality, but as both follow *a priori* principles in much the same way, beauty is a proper *symbol* of morality. Science works with sense experience (*intuition*) and phenomena; morality uses noumena but apart from intuition. "None of them can produce a theoretical knowledge of their object as a thing in itself" (I, § 2). But the

world of liberty, of moral choice, must act in some way upon the world of phenomena, of nature:

The concept of freedom must accomplish in the world of sense the purpose dictated by its laws, and so there must exist the possibility for nature to be conceived in such a way that at least the conformity to law which has form agrees with the possibility of purposiveness (according to the laws of freedom) which must be realized in it. So, there must be a foundation for the *unity* of the suprasensible, which lies at the basis of nature, with the practical demands of the concept of freedom; the concept of that foundation, even if neither a practical nor a theoretical knowledge of it can be attained, and, consequently, it does not have a sphere of its own, makes possible nevertheless the circulation of the mode of thinking according to the principles of the former to the mode of thinking according to the principles of the latter. (I, § 2).

This circulation is very important, for judgements are the way in which we interpret the world and discover its laws, starting from a unification of experience which is thought of *as if* it answered to a purposiveness. Then, aesthetic pleasure is a kind of side effect of the general workings of knowledge, when there is no concept given for the object and no purpose give for the purposiveness. In aesthetic perception, the faculties of representation enter into "free play" with one another. "[Beauty provides] neither physical nor moral freedom. But it is allied to the supersensible conditions of freedom. In this supersensuous reality, the theoretical faculty and the practical faculty are mutually and mysteriously interwoven."

4.5.6.3. Beauty and Sublimity

The ability of aesthetic experience to use the contents of both nature and morality is related by Kant to a favourite eighteenth-century distinction: the one between beauty and sublimity. The contents of beauty are mainly natural, those of sublimity mainly moral, although both nature and morality are at play in both. Kant devotes a detailed transcendental analysis to the concept of sublimity. We will just repeat some of his conclusions. Beauty is that which seems to have a purpose. Sublime is that which seems to go beyond our judgement. "Sublime is that which, from the very fact that it can be thought, proves a faculty of the spirit which surpasses all limits of the senses" (I, § 25). The feeling of sublimity proves that there is a capability of man which goes beyond his physical limitations (mathematical sublime: the proof that our faculty of knowledge goes beyond our senses and intuition; natural or dynamic sublime, powerful and terrible objects make us see by contrast in our insignificance an spiritual superiority: we are small, but we can apprehend the immense in one single concept: we feel our existence as noumena; we are conscious of our dignity as moral beings. In the sense of sublimity, nature is used as a pattern for our ideas: it is a more intellectual perception (not related to *taste*, but to *feeling*). "Sublime is that which pleases immediately because of its very resistance against the interest of our senses" (I, § 29).

4.5.6.4. Art

"Beautiful art . . . is a model of representation that, in itself, bears a conformity to an end, and , even though it has no finality, fosters the cultivation of the faculties of the spirit for social communication" (I, § 44)

We find again in Kant the idea that art must seem natural, even if we are not tricked into believing that it actually is nature: ""In a work of art we must

realize that it is art and not nature; nevertheless, the finality in its form must seem as free from all violence of rule as if it were a product of mere nature" (I, § 45). Artistic beauty is set by Kant at a lower level than natural beauty. He says that a love for nature is a sure sign of a good soul, but that love for the arts is not. Kant sees the arts as the product of *genius*, the natural disposition of the spirit by which nature gives rules to art. Technique and imitation of models are necessary but it is not all: there is always a need of what can't be learnt, the spirit of the work, the undefinable. That is because the genius is not content with imitating other works and following the rules: he establishes new rules which cannot be deduced from previously existing ones. Genius cannot be imitated: only emulated. The imagination of the genius creates a second nature, with a mixture of laws analogic to those of nature and also moral principles coming from reason. The arts, and especially poetry, use nature as a symbol of morality or theology.

Kant classifies the arts into: arts of word, of figure and of play of forms:

- Arts of the word:

- *Rhetoric* is not highly valued by Kant. He defines it as the art which deals with a question of reason as if it were a mere play of the imagination (cf. the late 17th and 18th-century reaction against rhetoric)

- *Poetry*, on the other hand, presents itself from the very beginning as a play of the imagination, which nevertheless affords matter for reason.

- Arts of figure:

Sculpture, painting, landscape gardening, etc.

- Arts of play of forms:

In space: wallpaper

In time: music. Beauty is at its purest in these abstract arts, which are freest from concepts (free beauty). "It is worth noting that here was a system which conceived Homer and Shakespeare as less aesthetically pure than wallpaper" (Wimsatt and Brooks 372).

Kant also deals in his Critique with the lesser aesthetic emotions: among them, games and laughter, which is for him the result of an absurdity: "laughter is an emotion which is born from the sudden change of an anxious expectation into nothing" (I, § 54)

4.5.6.5. Kant's Influence

Kant's influence was enormous in the literary theory of the late eighteenth and of the nineteenth century, for instance in later aesthetic approaches to "art for art's sake." It can also be traced out in modern critical schools, like the New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstruction.

Kant's philosophy states forcefully the essential alienation of man as a thinking being from nature, and the need for a reconciliation which is somehow fulfilled by the aesthetic experience. This alienation will be a constant theme in romantic thought. Indeed, it would not be a great exaggeration to say that all German romantic criticism is devoted to the problem of how literature reconciles sensory experience and ideas, "the worldly and the transcendental," "object and subject," "nature and will, morals," "history and contingency with system and necessity." (Wimsatt and Brooks 370)

In this sense, Kant's work is a powerful systematization of eighteenth-century aesthetics, a foreshadowing of Romanticism and an important influence on later critics.

SOURCES:

Adapted mainly from:

A Guide to the Study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature, ©English Department, Brooklyn College.

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End of Part I

Part II

Chapter Five

Romanticism



5.1. Romanticism in Germany

5.2. William Wordsworth

5.3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge

5.1. Romanticism in Germany

5.1.1. The Romantic Perspective

5.1.2. The Kantian Heritage

5.1.3. G. W. F. Hegel

5.1.1. The Romantic Perspective

5.1.1.1. Introduction

5.1.1.2. Historicism

5.1.1.3. Classicism and Romanticism

5.1.1.4. Creative Imagination

5.1.1.1. Introduction

The focus of critical activity had been located in England in the mid-eighteenth century, when the English empirical philosophy was at the avant-garde of European thought. Indeed, many Romantic theories derive from the English aestheticians of the previous century: only they are magnified, unified in a system and have had metaphysical overtones added. In the late 18th century it shifts to Germany; and *idealism*, not empiricism, is its philosophical basis; an idealism which descends from the work of Kant as interpreted by Fichte, and which is developed by Schelling and Hegel.

In this regard, it is also worth noting how early in the period the work of writers began to appear whose concern with 'Sensibility' and 'Nature'

foreshadowed the **Romantic*** movement around the turn of the 18th Century. James Thomson and John Dyer published poems with 'transitional' elements in the late 1720s; Thomas Gray, Edward Young, Mark Akenside and William Collins were all active in the mid-1740s; James Macpherson's 'Ossian' poems appeared in the early 1760s; Horace Walpole's 'Gothic' novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, was published in 1764, and Thomas Chatterton's 'Rowley' forgeries were written later in the same decade; by the 1770s, the poetry of George Crabbe and William Cowper was being published, as was Henry Mackenzie's novel, *The Man of Feeling*; and by 1789, when the present 'period' ends, unmistakably **Romantic works by Robert Burns, William Blake and William Beckford (the Gothic fantasy, *Vathek*)** had been produced.⁴

In the second half of the eighteenth century, aesthetic thought in Germany is divided between the classical tendency represented by Winckelmann, Gottsched and Lessing, and the influence of English empiricism (on Breitingen and Bodmer). Of course, many of the ideas of these thinkers are already on the way to Romanticism. It is characteristic of German Romanticism that it had a strong Classical flavour, and is linked to a strong revival of classical Greek influence.

5.1.1.2. Historicism

Anyway, the first thinker whom we can call clearly romantic is Herder. In his *Fragmente zur deutschen Litteratur* (1767), *Causes of the Decline of Taste in Different nations*, and *Kritische Wälder* (1769) he will relate poetry to race, geography and history. Herder is interested in creativity and the role of symbolism in literature and language, as well as in the study of comparative

⁴ See Widdowson, Peter, "Chapter 3: The Augustan Period," *The Palgrave Guide to English Literature and Its Contexts: 1500-2000*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2004: pp. 56-83.

literature. Friedrich Schlegel will call poetry the most specifically human energy, and the central document of any culture. These ideas will become quickly diffused. Much of the discourse of nationalism derives from Romantic conceptions: the idea of the collective spirit of a people, or a nation, the notion that civilizations are organic beings with a development, youth, maturity and old age.

Historicism is in direct opposition to neoclassicism. Herder's historicism had some precedents in **Giambattista Vico** (*Principii d'una Scienza Nuova*, 1725) as well as in the incipient Renaissance appreciation of "gothicism", but the latter will become obscured during the age of French influence, and Vico was unknown outside Italy until the 19th. Anyway, Shakespeare had always been appreciated in England and his popularity extends to France and Germany in the late eighteenth century. And there had already been some moves towards a revaluation of medieval literature in England, f. i. in Dryden's comments on Chaucer, in Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1763), or in the work of Thomas Warton (*Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser*, 1754; *History of English Poetry*, 1774-8). and of primitivism and mythical thinking (Ossian). The eighteenth century had also witnessed the gradual development of antiquarianism and philology, which were the indispensable tools to effect the revival of the national literary tradition.

Some of the most popular theories of literary history are born in this age. Friedrich Wolf's *Prolegomena in Homerum* (1795) will put forward the thesis that the Homeric epics were put together from a number of pre-existing, smaller oral poems. We recognise here the Romantic notion of the epic as the collective creation of a nation. This theory will be applied to epic in general (*Chanson de Roland*, *Cantar de Mio Cid*) during the nineteenth century, in which the interest in literary history is the predominant kind of

literary study. Among the best-known historians of literature who address the issue of "traditionalism" we may mention Gaston Paris, Menéndez Pidal or Joseph Bédier.

5.1.1.3. Classicism vs. Romanticism

This difference originates in the German romantics themselves (Schlegel, Schiller and Goethe). Romantic had been for some time a pejorative term, but it soon became an honorific one, as is usually the case with avant-garde movements. In his *Lectures on Dramatic art and Literature* (1808) A.W. Schlegel opposed the neoclassical exclusiveness and decorum, and further specifies the opposition between classicism and romanticism:

| classicism | vs | romanticism |
|-------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| old | | new |
| beauty | | energy |
| universal | | individual |
| ideal | | characteristic |
| closed | | open |
| static | | progressive. |

But this conception took some time to develop, even among the romantics themselves. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a strongly classical spirit, had called "romantic" all that was weak and morbid in literature, works permeated by an excess of subjective feeling and the egotism of the author. On the other hand, everything fresh and healthy was to be called "classic,"

irrespective of its age. But in general, "[t]he German critics conceived Classical art to be a direct, objective and happily unsophisticated communion with nature, and romantic (or modern) art to be a view of nature complicated, somewhat unhappily, by various phases of reflexiveness and subjectivity" (Wimsatt and Brooks 368). Goethe had to accept in the end that he was a "romantic" writer like all the other moderns. There is in the romantic writers a feeling that man has lost the unity with the world that he had in classical times, that the personality of modern man is fragmented, that thought and reflection have somehow broken the harmony between man and the world. The nostalgia for the lost unity is projected to nature, which becomes then the companion and confident of the poet's soul, feeling his emotions. A variant of this idea of man's estrangement from the world gives us Hegel's distinction of the three ages of art: oriental, classic and romantic.

The opposition between "classics" and "romantics" is quickly popularized in the rest of Europe, above all by Mme. de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* ; in England, Coleridge will be an important introducer and continuator of German ideas; he will use the term "romantic" in its new, self-conscious sense from 1811 on.

5.1.1.4. The poetic imagination

Poetry is seen as a force which will renew the spiritual energies of mankind, exhausted after the scientifically centered thought of the previous century. Poetic imagination is then seen as the counterpart of logical and scientific thought. The poet, Goethe or Schlegel affirm, thinks like a primitive, not with concepts but with symbols, allegories, metaphors. His thought reinforces the links of man and nature. Conceptual thought estranges man from nature; the role of poetry is to effect the reconciliation, to make man one with himself

and with the universe once more. Novalis believes that science turns the infinite creative music of the universe into the dull clattering of a gigantic mill driven by the stream of chance and floating upon it, a mill, without architect and without miller, grinding itself to pieces, in fact a perpetuum mobile.

Poetic imagination, Schelling and Schlegel believe, is to **provide modern man with a new mythology**. They believe that the modern age has lost its link to the universe, its mythology, and that only poetry can restore it. Poetry conceived in this way would be a kind of philosophy, the highest philosophy, because it would be a creative one. Novalis will identify poetry and reality: *"The more poetical, the more true."*

At the same time, however, poetry is being linked to the most unconscious processes of the human mind, dreams: Jean-Paul Richter sees poetry as creative dreaming, and dreaming as involuntary poetry.

The emphasis on poetic imagination is linked to a double emphasis in the personality of the poet and in the lyrical genre. The highest poetical enterprise is not the relatively "objective" and communal epic poem, but the subjective and individualistic lyrical poetry. The interest has turned from the external world to the knowing and expressing self. The poetic word is seen as the "direct energy of the soul". Poetry works by no sense, Herder says as he opposes Lessing's distinctions in *Laocoon* ; rather, it acts directly on the soul. The poetic word is not an imitation of created objects, Herder continues, but of the creative act of God. This creative act is common to all artistic activities. The romantics will favour any assimilations of the arts. In the words of Schlegel, we should try to bring the arts closer together and seek for transitions from one to the others. Statues perhaps may quicken into

pictures, pictures become poems, poems music, and (who knows?) in like manner stately church music may once more rise heavenward as a cathedral."

Schopenhauer sees music as "the fullest revelation of will," as the most spiritual and perfect of all the arts: it is their ideal, all arts aspire to reach the purity of music. In literature, the lyrical genre is closest to music.

There is also a critical revaluation of [the comic and the grotesque](#), which had been comparatively neglected by neoclassical theory. One concept is especially relevant: *irony*, as defined by Friedrich Schlegel and K.W.F. Solger. This *romantic irony*, as we shall call it, is a kind of irony directed towards the poetic subject himself, and towards his techniques and attitudes. It does not set the poet above one character, but rather one aspect of the poet's soul against another. Schlegel sees irony as a play between phases of our own stupidity and shrewdness, and sees in it a means to stimulate the evolution of the self. The poet, asserting the essential independence of his creative spirit above the links it has formed with objects and ideas, mocks his own ideals, making them clash with reality and parodying himself. Solger sees [irony as co-extensive with poetry](#): it is the best expression of the poetic imagination breaking the limits of the matter, represented here by the ideals and media of the poet himself. Poems written in this fashion, such as Heine's, are a series of indulgences in sentiment followed by irony. However, romantic irony is not as self-destructive as it seems: often it is there as a disclaimer, a mere means to justify the previous overflow of sentiment, which is after all more significant.

All this insistence on subjectivity will also bear on critical thought. F. Schlegel sees in criticism something near to poetry: it must in a like manner be guided by metaphorical and intuitive thought, rather than by discursive

reasoning. "*Poetry can only be criticized by poetry.*" This is the theoretical basis for the wave of impressionistic criticism which will be predominant in the nineteenth-century.

5.1.2. The Kantian heritage

5.1.2.1. Friedrich Schiller

5.1.2.2. Friedrich Schelling

5.1.2.3. Arthur Schopenhauer

5.1.2.1. Friedrich Schiller

Schiller believes that in Classical time the human spirit had a wholeness which has been lost in modern times. Human nature is no longer a unified force: it has been divided into two opposed principles: *the sensual or material drive and the formal drive*. The first links man to matter and temporality, to his *phenomenal existence*. The second tries to harmonize human diversity, to annul space and time; it has to do with morals and with the *noumenal existence of man*. But there exists the possibility of harmonizing these two impulses in a third, the "play-drive," which is the basis of art. The play-drive annuls time within time, reconciling man's existence as a phenomenon with absolute being, and change with eternity, the world of sense and the world of ideas. "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays." Beauty accomplishes no particular result whatever, intellectual or moral, but it restores the wholeness and freedom of man, the unity of his intellect and his morals. Art, Schiller believes, is the proof that that moral freedom is possible for man in spite of his physical existence. The purity of the aesthetic effect is never complete: in any work there is a certain

amount of arbitrariness and chance which is alien to beauty. Music is the purest kind of art; poetry joins the purity of music with the plastic quality of the other arts.

5.1.2.2. Friedrich Schelling

In his treatise *On the Relation of the Plastic Arts to Nature* Schelling saw man's creativity as analogous of the unconscious creativity of nature. Conversely, the processes of nature are an unconscious artistic activity: nature follows an ideal pattern without knowing it. He also saw art as the conciliation of our subjectivity with the external world. Art will reproduce in itself the steps which nature effects in its elevation towards spirituality. It conciliates natural forms to the shape of ideas, universalizing them. For Schelling, this is not effected through *allegory*, which posits a dead nature and a mechanical relationship between world and ideas; the conciliation comes through *symbol*, which is not a generality, but, paradoxically, a particular which contains a generality in itself, an individual turned into a prototype. That is, beauty does not come from the subjection of art to the imitation of nature, nor from the subjection of nature to art (classical idealization). Beauty comes through symbol, when the spirit captures what is naturally characteristic in the natural form. This portrayal of the characteristic is only a first step, corresponding to the level of physical bodies in nature. Then will come the harmony of form and idea (grace) found in classical sculpture. But the highest spiritualization of art comes with the portrayal of the human soul, best effected in painting, whose development is linked to that of christianity.

Schelling was also a pioneer in the comparative studies of literature, myth and religion. His influence on later thinkers is considerable: it is enormous

in Coleridge, who copied whole passages from Schelling and presented them as his own. Schelling's analogies between the development of art and the elevation of nature towards spirituality will be developed by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Fine Art*.

5.1.2.3. Arthur Schopenhauer

The well-known opposition between the two irreducible sides of human existence (the phenomenal and the noumenal in Kant) appears in Schopenhauer as the opposition between the *world as representation* and the *world as will*. Only through art, Schopenhauer believes, is the mind completely free from space, time, logic and the principle of causality, the laws which govern the (phenomenal) world as representation; only then is pure will manifested. Art is the "objectification of will." This objectification may occur at higher or lower grades. Music is the purest manifestation of the will, at the greatest level of subjectivity. Poetry is a more objectified kind of art, but some genres are more subjective than others.

For instance, in poetry, Schopenhauer believes, tragedy represents a higher degree of objectivity of will than lyric poetry. Lyric poetry is an essentially subjective literary genre: its subject is the intense feeling of our will as volition or frustration. It is not wholly objective, because perception and desire are mingled. The will imparts its influence to the objective surroundings described, and vice-versa. Tragedy, on the other hand, represents the highest grade of objectivity of the will. The will realizes that it is at strife with itself in its objectivization, and there is a catharsis which consists in the resignation of the will to live. Art provides in this way a kind of release from material existence, but it is only temporary.

5.1.3. G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831)

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is the most accomplished and influential representative of German idealism. "Like Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas before him, Hegel tried to develop a system of philosophy in which all the contributions of his major predecessors would be integrated."

Hegel's approach is the summit of the new historical approach of the Romantic age. The novelty of his system is that in it the historical approach and the conceptual approach are one and the same:

He did not view different philosophies as so many alternatives among which one might shop to find a congenial one. Instead, he considered the historical sequence of philosophical ideas as crucial. He believed that various systems represent successive phases in the development of the human spirit. Hegel, more than anyone else, established the history of philosophy as an important field of study. He felt that his own philosophy was superior mainly because it was more comprehensive and did justice to the insights of his predecessors. (Kaufmann).

According to Hegel, culture and philosophy are nothing but the latest phases in a process by which the Absolute Spirit, the origin and end of reality (God or the Universe) comes to know itself through an act of consciousness. Philosophy, abstract thought, is the ultimate reflection by which the Spirit comes to know itself. Each phase in the development of the human spirit cannot help but produce a philosophical image of the world that mirrors its own state of development. Hegel traced the evolution of human conscience in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807). In the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817) he gave a full outline of his system, in which every aspect of human activity, every science or institution, is interpreted as

the representative of a moment in the development of the spirit. Hegel's spirit moves with the sun, from East to West: the dawn of civilization is in the East, but according to Hegel the eastern peoples lie at present in stagnation, having been unable to follow the development of the spirit through its later phases. That was the privilege, he believes, of the Greeks first, and of the Germans (above all Hegel) in our age. This pro-Western, pro-German attitude is chauvinistic enough, but it is easier to criticize it than to think without the teleological perspective on cultural history which we owe to Hegel.

Other important works by Hegel include the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of Right*. After his death, his students published their notes his lectures, which consist of a philosophical approach to many different subjects (religion, history, history of philosophy, and art).

His *Aesthetics* or *Philosophy of Fine Art* undertakes the study of art considered as a major phase in the development of the spirit, as a means by which we become conscious of the most sublime spiritual ideas. Art was the highest expression of the Idea in the Classical age, until it was replaced by religion in the Christian era. Art lingers on today (like religion, or any other cultural manifestation) although the period when it was the highest expression of the Spirit is long over: philosophy is now a more adequate expression of the Idea than art. But art nevertheless mirrors in its own development the development of Spirit itself. Early art (Oriental or Symbolic art) was akin to religion; after a classical age of harmony (where art, we might say, is art and nothing but art) contemporary (Romantic) art is somewhat contaminated by the philosophical spirit, and is abstract and reflexive.

"By 'symbolic art' Hegel means something very much like what many romantic critics call allegory. It is an art in which objects represented are made to have arbitrary meanings, in which the relation of object to meaning is abstract" (Adams 517). These critics (e. g. Coleridge) oppose allegory to symbol (which in their system is a characteristic of *romantic* art. Hegel defines classical art as a phase of balance and harmony between the idea and the form which represents it. This balance is lost in Romantic art in favour of the idea. Romantic art cannibalizes itself, and art becomes the subject matter of art: "Art becomes its own domain, the release of Spirit into Art itself, not merely into objects represented in art Romantic art is realized by painting, music and poetry in ascending order of freedom" (Adams 517). Romantic art is more spiritual than either symbolic or classical art, but it is still inferior to religion and philosophy as a manifestation of the Idea.

Each phase of the development of art manifests itself best in a particular art: therefore, the summit of Oriental art is architecture (massive, abstract and linked to religious or political power); in the Classical age, the harmony between artistic form and content finds its natural expression in the representation of the human figure through sculpture; in the Romantic age, more spiritual arts, such as painting, music, and poetry, are the most representative. His age, therefore, is for Hegel one of reflexive literature. In the quintessential Romantic arts, music and poetry, the original medium of artistic representation, the space of architecture, sculpture or painting, has become subjective: these arts are temporal, like consciousness itself, rather than spatial.

Hegel's aim in his *Philosophy of Fine Art* is to study the concept of the beautiful and the spiritual capacity of each art and artistic style in themselves, in an abstract way: it is not the role of philosophy, he argues, to

deal with specific objects (that is, philosophy is concerned with the theory of literature or of the other arts, not with criticism). The critical activity may be conceptual (and therefore abstract), which is its highest manifestation, or it may consist in a concrete and superficial judgement of taste, where there is no possibility of argument. The former activity is the highest, and only it will allow us to appreciate the highest manifestations of art: "Taste recoils and disappears in the presence of genius" (76). Hegel sees the critical and theoretical activity as the fulfillment of the possibilities of art. Art is, like philosophy, a conceptual activity; only the concept is not wholly present to itself. Art is essentially an alienation of the Idea in a sensory form: the conceptual activity which examines art therefore in a way restores the Idea to itself. This fact is above all a characteristic of our late, or Romantic, way of experiencing art: "Art itself, as it is nowadays, is destined to become the object of thought." Hegel is perhaps the first theorist to announce the death of art, a death which has constantly been with us since the Romantic age: "Art is for us, as far as its supreme aim is concerned, a thing of the past" (38).

The philosophy of Hegel gives a new expression to Classical and Romantic themes such as the necessity of idealization in art, its moralizing virtues, the arbitrariness of taste, historicism, the nature of imagination or the aim of criticism. In his own terms, we could say that in his aesthetics these classical themes are sublated (*aufgehoben*), they become the component parts of a new and wider theory of art which is a part of a theory of reality. This theory was soon contested from many angles (by the existentialists, the pragmatists, Marx or Nietzsche). Anyway, Hegel would perhaps be satisfied to see that in the work of his best critics his thought was not rejected, but sublated.

5.2. William Wordsworth (1770-1850)



5.2.1. 1800 Preface: Poetic Diction

5.2.2. 1815 Preface: Poetic Imagination

5.2.1. 1800 Preface: Poetic Diction

Poetic diction had been felt as a problem in English literature at least since the time of Chaucer and the late Middle Ages, when there was a wave of Latinisms in an effort to enrich the English language. Spenser had proposed another solution, the use of archaisms. During the Neoclassical era, the passion for decorum had led to a progressive dessication of poetic diction, which was believed to be apart and above everyday (or "idiomatick") language. The typical eighteenth-century poem is loaded with adjectives which are the heritage of poetic tradition rather than of observation, often neatly coupled with a noun in a stock phrase (for instance, "fresh pastures and singing brooks") which has been called by some the "neoclassical kenning"; a product of imitation and tradition, the kind of expression you would never find outside poetry. Its very immobility is a sign of the world-view which supports this poetic tradition: a belief in order, conservatism, dogmatic immobilism. This existence of a "poetic language" characterized by

special words and expressions was felt by many to be a mark of distinction: thus, Gray and Johnson were proud of the English poetic idiom.

The neoclassical "kenning," however praised by Johnson, was a dead weight placed on poetry. The real kenning (in old Germanic poetry) does not present us the individual experience of the poet, but is instead the voice of the community, it is alive in that sense. The neoclassical kenning is a formula inherited from a poetic tradition which is no longer able to voice the experience of its culture; it is a poor substitute for real perception and poetical intuition. Wordsworth writes an "Essay on Epitaphs" in which he criticises Pope's conventional epitaphs, which made a lavish use of classical clichés. He also opposes the conception of words as a "dress" for thought. In the preface to the 2nd edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) he states his poetic manifesto, which is at the same time that of English romanticism. Wordsworth will provide "the first thorough-going Longinian criticism of poetic diction in English" (Edinger). He carries further the demand for mimetic truth and the recapturing of experience that is found in the aestheticians of the 18th century, and he separates the concept of verisimilitude from the classical doctrine of the three styles, which is abandoned at last.

Wordsworth calls his poems "**experiments**," and he presents them as models of a new kind of poetry. His aim, he says, is "to ascertain how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a poet may rationally endeavor to impart" (433). So, an experiment, first of all, in a new poetic diction.

The principal object, then, proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of the language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting in tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. (434).

Narrative poems such as "Michael" or "The Two Brothers" in this collection are perhaps the best examples of this experimental diction.

Wordsworth's demands in the field of poetic diction can be related to the "perceptual" or "experiential" standard gradually developed for literature during the XVIIIth century: He proposes that poetic diction be modelled on spoken language, and not previous literary productions. The prevailing norm among poets of his time he calls an "inane phraseology" (434), a set of "arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation" (435). We may note that this setting of actual (spoken) usage as the norm is already present in Horace, and his advice is repeated by Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith and Swift in the heyday of neoclassicism. But then Wordsworth is reacting against the poetic language of his contemporaries, rather than against Pope or Dryden.

- He also demands that poetic diction be modelled on primitive, passionate and natural utterance, that which is most spontaneous, the product of emotion. This faith of Wordsworth's in spontaneous utterance, this appreciation of what is natural and not elaborated may be linked with the

popularistic strain of romanticism, and was prefigured by Ossianism, Vico's theories of mythical thought and to the democratic faith in the people and simple intuition. Let us not forget that Wordsworth writes in the wake of the French Revolution, of which he had been an ardent admirer: he is not far from accusing the earlier poetry of being aristocratic, and far from the real concerns and language of the common people. Goethe, another admirer of the bourgeois revolution, had set in the middle classes his literary ideal of spontaneity. Wordsworth already needs to look further. A very similar brand of popularistic faith will be found later in Tolstoi. In Wordsworth, this is a reaction against the polite and aristocratic side of Neoclassicism. He holds a naturalistic creed according to which emotions are simpler, clearest and purest in the country and among the lower classes: the town and the higher classes are decadent, and are far from the natural poetry which can be heard in the mouth of simple people. Among the higher classes, the passions are restrained by conventionality: among the common people they are less restrained, and so they are "more accurately contemplated, and more forcefully communicated" (434). Wordsworth thinks that the problem of poetic diction is one of urban artificiality, which produces the hackneyed verbal conventions of late Neoclassicism. The preservation of the previous poetic tradition was for Wordsworth a mere instance of social vanity; poetical clichés, personification of abstract entities, etc., are to disappear from the new poetry.

Many of Wordsworth's poems are "dramatic", that is, much of the speaking is not attributed to the poet or his persona, but rather to a character, usually a peasant. It is the emotion of this character which gives its coloring to the diction; and such a diction must not look learned, bookish or "poetic" in any old sense. "Such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language than

that which is frequently substituted for it by poets" (434). The voice of the author or that of poetical conventions must not be heard behind that of the characters; elaboration of language is acceptable if necessary only in the poet's own speeches. Near the end of his "Preface," Wordsworth asks for the indulgence of the reader in case he had let slip by "those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words or phrases, from which no man can altogether protect himself" (442). Indeed, other critics (Coleridge in 1817, and Sir Henry Taylor in 1834) would accuse Wordsworth of falling in the same defects which he had criticised: stock phrases and unnatural language in the mouth of characters ("ventriloquism," as Coleridge puts it). Lack of both novelty and decorum in his low moments. And, conversely, most later critics have argued that Wordsworth's theory of poetry falls short of explaining his own poetic achievement. It may be noted that Wordsworth always speaks of a selection of the language of the lower classes: this is contradictory with the spirit of the new conception he is bringing forward.

- As a corollary of these views, Wordsworth proposes to suppress the concept of poetic diction altogether. Poetic diction was not true to nature, and so it is suppressed. Indeed, Wordsworth affirms, the language of many sections of good poems differs in no way from that of prose, apart from the question of metre:

a large portion of the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good prose. We will go further. It may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. (436)

The difference between poetry and prose, Wordsworth holds, is that prose works with concepts and poetry with emotions. But this is not a difference in language, he says. The only clear difference in language is meter, and even that is not so clear, if we take into account the rhythm of some kinds of prose.

Then, why use verse at all? Wordsworth says that it is a means to contain and refrain passion by means of a mechanical regularity. But then he contradicts himself doubly when he not only admits later on that meter intensifies, rather than diminish emotion, and that metre works through continual and regular impulses of surprise. Coleridge will give a better account of how regularity and surprise can be produced at the same time.

5.2.2. 1815 Preface: Poetic Imagination

As we have seen, the Romantics stress the expressive and subjective aspects of literary creation. Already in Wordsworth's 1800 preface, the emphasis had fallen on the relationship between the poet and the poem, on the problem of composition, creation, imagination. Emotion, imagination, expression, sincerity, and imagination are among the chief concerns of all other English romantic poets and theorizers of Romanticism (such as Coleridge, Shelley, Blake, Hazlitt, Keats, Mill, Carlyle, Arnold). The German romantics had considered the poetic imagination as the human faculty which is in immediate contact with truth: truth is now a question of feeling, and no longer a question of logic. Already in Wordsworth we find a new valuation of the imagination, and a care to distinguish it from lower faculties of the human spirit. The best known is the antithesis between imagination and fancy. During the 17th and 18th centuries both terms had been rough synonyms, although in some psychological theories (such as Hobbes' in

Leviathan) "imagination" was used for the soberly literal and non-creative settlement of impressions in memory. In spite of this modest claim, imagination held its ground of respectability during the reaction against rhetoric, while fancy, associated with "wit," with fortuitous, non-essential and cold establishment of (false) associations. Following this tradition, William Taylor (*British Synonyms Discriminated*, 1813) defined fancy as a dynamic faculty, as the power of combining and evoking sensations, while imagination is a lower, static faculty. Wordsworth criticised these definitions in his 1815 preface. He opposes Taylor's sensationalist definition of imagination, defining it in the German way, as a dynamic, creative faculty. Indeed, for Wordsworth, even fancy is creative in a limited way:

Fancy does not require that the materials which she makes use of should be susceptible of change in their constitution, from her touch; and, where they admit of modification, it is enough for her purpose if it be slight, limited and evanescent

The law under which the processes of Fancy are carried on is as capricious as the accidents of things, and the effects are surprising, playful, ludicrous, amusing, tender or pathetic, as the objects happen to be appositely produced or fortuitously combined. Fancy depends upon the rapidity and profusion with which she scatters her thoughts and images; trusting that their number, and the felicity with which they are linked together, will make amends for the want of individual value: or she prides herself upon the curious subtilty and the successful elaboration with which she can detect their lurking affinities.

Finding a witty pun could serve as a typical operation of fancy. Imagination, however, is a higher and more fundamentally active faculty: it does not deal

with fortuitous affinities, but with the essential relationships between objects, their underlying unity. This unity which is not perceived by discursive reasoning, but rather by feeling; imagination is a subjective re-fashioning of appearance:

[the Imagination] draws all things to one it makes things animate or inanimate, beings with their attributes, subjects with their accessories, take one one colour and serve to one effect.

[the Imagination] recoils from everything but the plastic, the pliant, and the indefinite When the Imagination frames a comparison . . . a sense of the truth of the likeness, from the moment that it is perceived, grows-and continues to grow- upon the mind; the resemblance depending less upon outline of form and feature, than upon expression and effect; less upon casual and outstanding, than upon inherent and internal, properties: moreover, the images invariably modify each other the Imagination is conscious of an indestructible dominion; æthe Soul may fall away from it, not being able to sustain its grandeur; but, if once felt and acknowledged, by no act of any other faculty of the mind can it be relaxed, impaired, or diminished.

The poetic symbol, instead of the pun, could be the emblem of the imaginative faculty: it belongs to a higher order of creation. In Wordsworth's great ode, "Intimations of Immortality," a child is compared to a running brook and set against the images of lambs playing on a field. The relationship between both is essential, and not accidental, because the child participates in the unity of nature in the same way as the brook and the lambs, while the narrator-observer is estranged from this scene and can only approach it as the subject of poetry, at a higher level of consciousness.

The concern for imagination is in the case of Wordsworth a German heritage, coming through Coleridge. However, Coleridge did not agree with Wordsworth's definition of the imagination, and would eventually refute it, drawing a sharper distinction between imagination and fancy, which according to Wordsworth had some common characteristics: "To aggregate and to associate, to evoke and to combine, belong as well to the Imagination as to the Fancy."

Neoclassical "imagination", even in its most comprehensive definitions, is fancy for Wordsworth and Coleridge. Fancy forms casual and fleeting combinations of memories already stored: so, it deals with concepts, not with actual experiences of things. Imagination, on the other hand, acts directly on experience, giving unity to objects, abstracting or adding properties to them. So, the whole 18th-century interpretation of these terms has been displaced:

18th century Wordsworth Coleridge

Wordsworth's definition of imagination would also be found insufficient by Coleridge on other account. Wordsworth explicitly links imagination only to "gratification," and not to values. But a moral view of imagination is implicit in his poems and in his discussion. The poet does not teach any definite concepts, but he conveys immediate intuitions of nature, which are even more valuable. "The poet thinks, and feels, in the language of human passions" (1800 Preface, 440). This conception we may link to Hazlitt's and John Stuart Mill's observations on poetic imagination. Poetry may not teach us how to think, but it teaches us how to feel. The emotions conveyed by poetry are "of such a nature, and in such a connection, that the understanding of the reader must be in some degree enlightened, and his

affections strengthened and purified" (1800 Preface, 435). Poetry adheres to that knowledge which is common to all men, it deals with the sympathies essential to human nature: love, fidelity, nostalgia, etc. "And thus the poet . . . converses with general nature" (1800 Preface, 439). Poetry thus contributes to rescue man from the drabness of the modern world, in which a blunting of the mind and feelings seems inevitable. But then Wordsworth indulges in romantic imperialistic claims and declares poetry the most embracing and discriminating knowledge, as anything can be the object of poetry.

Poetry had been defined by Wordsworth in 1800 in this way: "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ; it takes its origin form emotion recollected in tranquility" (441). But the poet does not simply pour out emotion: both memory and contemplation come into play. And the poet has had a long training on how to feel before he can be able to convey valuable emotions. These feelings do not come from an ordinary person: the poet has a superior sensibility, and has cultivated it through long and deep thought, creating some habits of mind which, followed "blindly and mechanically," produce descriptions of sentiments. The poet is more capable than the average of seeing difference in similarity, and similarity in difference, a cognitive ability on which our taste and moral feelings depend. The poet has the ability to conjure up passions in himself and to express them.

Nevertheless, in spite of all these cognitive elements, the emphasis is on the subjective emotion. The value of the poem is no longer measured with the Aristotelian norm, the successful shaping of an action. This action, if indeed it is present, is rather a means to convey the poet's emotion.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge conceive of poetic experience as an active response of the mind to personal perception and experience (more active, though, in Coleridge's account than in Wordsworth's). The observer does not merely record what he sees: he transfigures it when moved. In this way, perceiving with emotion, he may disclose the immanent beauty of things which escapes ordinary perception. These ideas are still influential in our century. They may be linked to the concept of "defamiliarization" put forward by the Russian Formalists, or to Wallace Stevens's conception of poetry as the sense that we can feel reality in itself, not dissolved in the conceptions of our own minds. But Wordsworth's conception is less intellectual, more emotive and sentimental. Through feeling, Wordsworth argues, we sense a unity in nature and a sense in experience, which had been dissolved by reason and the analytic faculty of the human mind.

Poetry, which has been the work of feeling, must be judged by feeling alone. Wordsworth forgets his proposal of an objective foundation of taste and asks the reader to judge his poems according to his personal reaction, and not according to the prejudice of others. This appeal to individual feeling against the criterion of authority is also highly romantic.

5.3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)



5.3.1. Imagination

5.3.2. Poetic Diction

5.3.3. Definition of a poem

5.3.4. The Poet

5.3.1. Imagination

In the first half of his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge tells of the evolution of his philosophical ideas from 18th-century associationism and empiricism to idealism, an evolution which he claims to have effected spontaneously, previous to his knowledge of German philosophy. The fact remains that whole passages of this book are translations of Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Kant's influence (for instance, in Coleridge's discussion of the internal purposiveness of the work of art, or his distinction between the beautiful and the agreeable) is evident in the earlier *Principles of Genial Criticism* (1814), and his essay *On Poesy or Art* (1808) was inspired by Schelling's *On the Relation between Art and Nature* (1807). Whatever credit we give to his claim of originality, it is anyway true that Coleridge was a major channel for the introduction of the new philosophical and critical ideas in England, and a perceptive thinker himself. He develops a

metaphysical and psychological theory along the lines set by Fichte and Schelling. Coleridge appeals for standards of criticism based on his philosophical psychology: already in his 1800 preface, Wordsworth had affirmed that "the ultimate reference of taste would be a study of the manner in which language and the human mind react on each other" (1800 prologue, 433). Coleridge, too, opposes the idea of criticism as a mere evaluation of literary works, and, above all, as a pointing out of petty faults: the main task of a critic is to elucidate the beauty of a work. The models to be followed in criticism are the classical critics: Aristotle, Horace, Longinus. Coleridge, we may note, may be a romantic poet and critic, but he values sound sense, and not emotion, in his ideal critic, just as he values in the poet (e. g. in Wordsworth) the union of deep feeling with profound thought. Critics, he believes, ought to refer "to fixed canons of criticism, previously established and deduced from the nature of man" (Biographia 36). His aim is

to reduce criticism to a system by the deduction of causes from principles involved in our faculties I laboured at a solid foundation on which permanently to ground my opinions in the component faculties of the human mind itself and their comparative dignity and importance. (11)

Coleridge will examine different psychological theories from Aristotle to the German Romantics, as a step towards the determination of those faculties. He opposes the **mechanism of some 18th century theories (Hartley, Hume)**, and asserts the active faculty of the mind, will. Will and thought, he says, are not blind mechanisms, as Hartley presented them, but rather controlling powers. The association of ideas (in the sense of Locke) may well be mechanical, but the mind works by alternately opposing and yielding to this mechanic movement, by an act of the will. So, there is in the mind an active and a passive power: they are connected by a third one, which is both active

and passive: imagination. In Chapter XII of his *Biographia* Coleridge develops an idealist theory of knowledge which draws heavily on Schelling, and which is the basis for his theory of the imagination.

In Chapter XIII he develops a difference between **Primary Imagination**, **Secondary Imagination** and **Fancy**:

The imagination then I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create' or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space, and blended with, and modified, by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word choice. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association. (167)

The practical conclusion for writers is that "the poet should paint to the imagination, not to the fancy" (252).

The origin of the opposition between primary and secondary imagination is vaguely Kantian. Fancy is a limited or false parallel of Secondary

Imagination. Coleridge criticises Wordsworth's near-equivalence between imagination and fancy; fancy merely combines; Wordsworth's fancy is Coleridge's wit, which is a pure play of the intellect, of concepts, without the passion of poetry. Primary Imagination can be related to Kant's Understanding, while **Secondary or Poetic Imagination is nearer to Kant's Reason**. In Kant's theory, the role of the Understanding face to experience was an active one: it sets its own forms and categories on experience, synthesizes the impressions into phenomena and elaborates judgements. "Every human being, thus, is, so far as he perceives anything at all, a creator and an idealizing agent" (Wimsatt and Brooks 393). Coleridge establishes an analogy between the imaginative capability of the poet and the creativity of the "infinite I Am." The parallel between the creativity of the poet and that of the cosmos makes us think of Schelling, but in Coleridge's account there is an emphasis on the consciousness and deliberation of the cosmic creativity, so that the word "God" is perhaps more appropriate here.

The poet, then, differs in degree and not in essence from other men. He has a greater ability of organizing, and a greater control over it. The Secondary imagination works the perceptual products of the Primary Imagination into symbols of ideas. Coleridge, like Aristotle, states that the poet must copy the essence, and not the mere fact, "which presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man."

Nature and consciousness mirror each other, developing through similar phases and processes. The poet, in watching nature, seeks "a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists" rather "than observing anything new."

Schelling and Plato are reconciled in Coleridge's dictum that whatever new things we discover are already known truths which had been forgotten. Like Schelling, Coleridge believes that art makes conscious, or rather explicit, what is unconscious in nature (although we may assume it to be conscious in God), and that this process is essentially the same as that of idealizing reality. The role of art in Schelling or Coleridge is similar to that of philosophy: art is a kind of philosophy, a "figured language of thought" ; a work of art is of a "middle quality between a thought and a thing."

The unity of a work of art is the integration of all its parts (matter) into one idea.

Imagination integrates the opposites, finding a balance of contraries. As Wordsworth had said, it makes strange what is familiar and familiarizes what is strange. Indeed, this idea was the groundwork for the original plan of the Lyrical Ballads to be written in collaboration by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth was to deal with themes of common life whose imaginative heightening would lead to an intuition of the presence of the unknown; Coleridge would develop fantastic themes (The Ancient Mariner) imaginatively infusing them with the known so as to produce credibility. In any case, Coleridge says, the work of the poet must join accurate observation with the modifying power of imagination, mixing the old and the new in such a way that the freshness of sensations is always present in the poem.

Other derivations of this general definition of imagination as an integration of opposites can be found in Coleridge's critical statements. For instance, he defines meter (Biographia XIV) as the result of a balance between passion and organization; or else he distinguishes imitation (infusing difference among the same or the same among different elements) from copying, or

makes the remark that the women in Shakespeare's plays, while preserving their individuality, are all essentially the same, variations on one woman. All these are instances of "a highly reflexive application of the doctrine of conciliation to the work of art conceived as a non-illusory object" (Wimsatt and Brooks 392).

It has been argued that, for all their elaboration, Wordsworth and Coleridge's theories of the imagination are narrow and restricted, in that they are made ad hoc, to suit the special kind of poetry they were writing. The subject of romantic poems is usually inspiration, creation, the poet's own sensibility, etc. They are highly reflexive, and so is Coleridge's theory of the imagination.

However, [i]t is one thing to say that all our knowledge is a "self-realizing intuition" which reconciles subject or conscious self with object or nature. (It is impossible to write a poem which will especially illustrate this transcendental principle. How could any one expression better illustrate or embody it than any other?). It is a vastly different thing to say that the forms of nature are, or are capable of being, suited to moral reflections-or that the latter can be, in any peculiar way, elicited or superinduced from the former. This is a very special showing of how "nature" is "thought", and "thought" is "nature". (It may be quite possible to illustrate this in a special kind of poem. (Wimsatt and Brooks 399)

Surely the Romantics' praise of symbol as opposed to allegory suits their own poems, just as it may lead to an undervaluation of much important literature (Dante, Cervantes, Rabelais are excepted by Coleridge). Their explanation of a parallel working of nature and the human mind makes their projective imagery especially suitable; the subjectivization or

personification of nature (what Ruskin called "the pathetic fallacy") is the most representative image in romantic poetry. So, their theory of imagination is a description of their own poetry: it is a poetry which suggests similitudes usually without stating them overtly. In the Romantic metaphor "[b]oth tenor and vehicle are wrought in a parallel process out of the same material. The landscape is both the occasion of subjective reflection or transcendental insight and the source of figures by which the reflection or insight is defined" (Wimsatt and Brooks 402; cf. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" or "Intimations of Immortality"). The best poems of the Romantics are philosophically purposive: they are the logical outcome of the approximation between poetry and philosophy made in contemporary theory, of Schelling's doctrine that poetry was the highest kind of philosophy. Romantic poems are over-reflexive, they "contain and assert the philosophy of nature and art which is supposedly also their formal principle" (Wimsatt and Brooks). This is something like Pope's "imitative harmony" translated to purely conceptual terms, and set at the heart of the poem's structure.

This ... they were led to do and were able to do because of the intimate union which they conceived to obtain between art and nature. The theory was endlessly reflexive and self-conscious Romantic poems tend to be about Romantic imagination. (Wimsatt and Brooks 402)

This hidden intellectualism leads to some incoherence in Coleridge's criticism. He states that pleasure is the immediate object of a poem, but then he cannot discriminate a good poem from a bad one unless he speaks of the passion and truth behind it. And his undervaluation of all which can be intellectual, of that which is mere "wit" or "fancy" restricts the field of subjects available for poetic treatment. Nothing too playful or merely witty

is adequate subject for a romantic poem, which tries to reach the infinity behind the fact.

5.3.2. Poetic Diction

In his essay "Shakespeare's Judgement Equal to His Genius" (1808, pub. 1836)

Coleridge re-states the main Romantic views on poetry. He wants poetry to be based on genius and originality, and to deal with its subject matter in such a way that its language will be organically linked to it; or rather, that the subject-matter is co-extensive with the poem: "to the truly great poets . . . there is a reason assignable not only for every word, but for the position of every word." Coleridge is the major English exponent of organicism as a metaphor for the work of art; he opposes organic form and mechanic form in the same way as the German romantics (Herder, Schlegel). Imagination produces organic forms, fancy merely mechanic forms. "The work of art must grow organically from within itself. Its principles of order are finally internal and not imposed from without" (Adams 459). There are rules in the work of art, Coleridge admits as he criticises the neo-classicists, but they are not imposed mechanically. The order of the work of art is like that of a living body: each part is connected to the whole, and each is at once end and means.

The true ground of the mistake lies in the confounding mechanical regularity with organic form. The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material; as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops itself form within, and the fulness of its

development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form. ("Shakespeare's Judgement" 462).

Coleridge opposes in this way, like Schelling or Goethe, symbol to allegory. Just as he opposes the rules of drama, in his *Biographia Literaria* he opposes that conception of poetry inherited from the eighteenth century: he is against the closed couplet, and favours lines running into each other and the use of plain words whenever possible. There is no question of "poetic diction" as something which can be isolated from the poems themselves. This was the defect of the poetry of the previous century for Coleridge: it presented "not so much of poetic thoughts as thoughts translated into the language of poetry" (9).

The effect of a good poem, Coleridge says, is to make us see life anew, to remove "the film of familiarity" which sets at length on all our thoughts and perceptions. An imaginative poem is characterized by its "awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us" (*Biographia* 168). This freshness of perception can never be achieved with a poetic diction which is old-fashioned, well-known; clichés and hackneyed expressions rather have the opposite effect, they dull our perception. However, as it happened with Wordsworth, Coleridge lays the stress not so much on novelty as on quality of expression; badness comes not so much from repetition as from intrinsic faults.

But Coleridge's attitude to poetic language is not the same as Wordsworth's. He will criticise Wordsworth's primitivistic assumptions as well as the implications which derived from them with respect to poetic language. Coleridge does not share Wordsworth's faith in the intrinsic virtues of the

cottagers and country life. He believes in the value of culture and education, rather than in "untutored minds" in contact with nature. He points out that Wordsworth's definition of "the language of real life" was equivocal: on one hand, he identified it with the language of the lower classes; on the other, that language was to be a "selection." In fact, he says, if you "select" from a particularity (language of peasants) what you obtain is a generality (language of men): "I adopt with full faith the principle of Aristotle that poetry as poetry is essentially ideal, that it avoids and excludes all accident, that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be representative of a class" (*Biographia* 192). Language, for Coleridge, does not spring immediately from nature in the way Wordsworth would have it: it is the product of a whole society, and it has a long history, in which the role of the learned is fundamental.

Even allowing that the same words can be used in prose and in poetry, Coleridge claims, the "poetic manner of combining words" is not that of prose. Coleridge identifies badness in poetry as faults of logic, psychology, good sense and taste: in general, faults against the rules of the Imagination. The criterion to define badness is not to be found in the opposition between the hackneyed and the new. The same is true for Wordsworth, although he complains that some themes and expressions beautiful in themselves could no longer be used because of their having been so drawn upon by bad poets. Today we tend rather to lay the stress upon this idea, following T.S. Eliot: "It is as wasteful for a poet to do what has been done already, as for a biologist to rediscover Mendel's theories."

5.3.3. Definition of a poem

For Coleridge, metre is the proper form for poetry. It favours, when it is successful, the most perfect blend of content and form; it must be adequate to the content of the poem and become one with its meaning. The role of metre is to intensify the attention of the reader to every element in the poem, as well as to the whole. Metre tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continual excitement of surprise, and by the quick reciprocation of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence (Biographia 207).

However, it is not a necessary element for poetry: only the most suitable form. And this is so because the language of poetry is not the same as the language of prose, even if its vocabulary is the same. It is peculiar to the Romantic era that poetry is defined not only with respect to science, but also with respect to other kinds of literature. Coleridge points out that poetry does not equal rhythmical language nor does it equal literature.

A poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part . . . one the parts of which mutually support and explain each other , all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement. (Biographia 172)

The communication of pleasure, Coleridge affirms, is the only legitimate way for a poet to moralize his readers (cf. the similar view in Dryden).

We may note that Coleridge has defined the whole of the poem as a system, a structure (cf. Aristotle on plot). This is only possible not merely through Wordsworth's orderly mind feeling spontaneously, but through reflection, consciousness and hard work.

In poetry, in which every line, every phrase, may pass the ordeal of deliberation and deliberate choice, it is possible, and barely possible, to attain that ultimatum which I have ventured to propose as the infallible test of a blameless style, namely its untranslatableness in words of the same language without injury to the meaning, Be it observed, however, that I include in the meaning of a word not only its correspondent object, but likewise all the associations which it recalls. For language is framed to convey not the object alone, but likewise the character, mood and intentions of the person who is representing it. (Biographia 263)

The same could be said of imagery. Together with dramatization, Coleridge points out the importance of imagery as an element which is used by the "invisible" author in directing the response of the reader. Imagery is significant and becomes alive when it is modified by a predominant passion, or when it has the virtue of reducing multiplicity to unity, or succession to an instant; or when a humour and an intellectual life is transferred to it from the poet's own spirit. That is, when it has an experiential, subjective and perceptual value, "when it moulds and colors itself to the circumstances, passion or character present and foremost in the mind " (Biographia 178). The guiding spirit of the imagery may be the author in an immediate way, or the author through his characters. This is the difference between

Shakespeare and Milton: "All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of Milton; while Shakespeare becomes all things, yet for ever remaining himself" (Biographia 180).

This new view of the relationship between the poet and his language will inspire many studies of the poets' imagery in the twentieth century, from Caroline Spurgeon's study of Shakespeare's imagery as a means of characterization and creation of atmosphere to Charles Mauron's "psychocriticism," which analyzes the mind of the poet on the basis of his "obsessive metaphors." This new perspective becomes possible after Coleridge and other romantics: let us note that language for Coleridge is no longer a mere means to communicate things or concepts: it is more like a tool which shapes reality. Likewise, we find a new definition of metaphor in Coleridge: it is a thought of its own, which creates a new meaning, and not a dress or cloak for a pre-existing thought.

In seeming paradox with his organic conception of the poem, Coleridge affirms that a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry. Yet if a harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved in keeping with the poetry; and this can be no otherwise effected than by such a studied selection and artificial arrangement as will partake of one, though not a peculiar, property of poetry. And this again can be no other than the property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written. (Biographia 173; cf. similar ideas in Wordsworth and Poe).

5.3.4. The Poet

Imagination and emotion, the principal characteristics of the poem, are in truth the characteristics of the poet.

To discuss what poetry is, Coleridge affirms, equals to discuss what a poet is. A poet is a person endowed with a peculiar ability to conciliate discordant qualities, a person endowed with a special ability to feel emotions combined with an unusual mental order (this conception is inherited by I. A. Richards). Needless to say, this is a gift which cannot be acquired.

The mind of the poet may seem disorderly at first sight, but in fact this appearance conceals a much more basic order: the poet is in tune with the universe. The universe is orderly, and the mind of the poet is orderly as well. His whole imaginative activity is one of ordering, of distinguishing the similar from the same. In this sense, poetry is a kind of repetition of God's creative act which is also an act of adoration of God.

Like Wordsworth, Coleridge insists on the necessity of objectivization in the poet; in shaping a poem, it is essential to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

Subjectivity is all right, but the truly great poets are characterized by their power to go beyond their circumstance, and by their keeping outside their work, which unfolds by itself: they objectivise, dramatise without personal involvement. Such is the case with Shakespeare: in his poems as well as in his plays, "You seem to be told nothing, but to see and hear everything" (Biographia 177). And such is not the case with some of Wordsworth's rustic

poems, in which you can hear the ventriloquist poet behind the puppet character—an instance of defective dramatization. Coleridge desires an "utter aloofness of the poet's own feelings from those of which he is at once the painter and the analyst" (Biographia 177), something which reminds us of later pronouncements by novelists around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the 20th century (Flaubert, Henry James, Joyce). The influence of Coleridge in this respect is far-reaching and goes beyond the Romantic age to inspire much of the New Critical attitudes in our own century.

End of Part II

Questions

Part I: Neoclassical School of Criticism

- Who started neoclassicism?
- When did neoclassical art start?
- How the neoclassical artistic features are transferred to language/literature?
- What does humanism mean in art?
- What are the main beliefs of humanism?
- What are the similarities and the differences between the Renaissance period and the Neoclassic period?
- What are the differences between the Renaissance Period and the Neoclassic Period?
- What are the similarities and differences between Neoclassicism and Romanticism in art and literature?
- What are the similarities and differences between Classicism and Romanticism in art and literature?
- What are the differences and similarities between romanticism and realism?
- Which are the differences and similarities between enlightenment and romanticism? How did they understand God, beings and the world?
- What are the characteristics of neoclassical art?
- What are the differences between classicism and romanticism?
- How do Neoclassicism and Classicism differ?
- How is the Renaissance and the Baroque art similar?
- What are the main stylistic differences between Palladian and Neoclassical architecture?
- What important things happened during the Renaissance period?

- What are the differences between Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassicism?
- What was the origin of the Renaissance?
- What was Samuel Johnson's most significant contribution to literature?
- What are the achievement and contribution of Samuel Johnson as a literary critic?
- What was Samuel Johnson known for?

Part II: The Romantic School of Criticism

- What is meant by romantic criticism?
- What is romanticism in literary criticism?
- What are the main characteristics of romantic criticism?
- What are the general themes of romantic criticism?
- What are the types of romanticism?
- What are some examples of romanticism?
- How do you know if a poem is romantic?
- What are three elements typically found in Romantic poetry?
- Who is the Most Romantic poet?
- What is romanticism explain with two examples?
- What is romanticism nowadays?
- What is romantic to a woman?
- What does romantic in nature mean?
- What is nature in Romantic poetry?
- Why is the Romantic Age called the return to nature?

- What is individualism in romanticism?
- How does imagination relate to romanticism?
- What is the role of imagination in Romantic poetry?
- Why is romanticism closely related with imagination?
- What is poetic imagination?
- Why do Romantics put so much weight on imagination?
- Whose poetry does deal with the problem of the role of imagination in relation to reality?
- What is imagination according to Wordsworth?
- How did the Romantics characterize nature?
- Why is nature so important to the Romantic poets?
- What did romantics believe about nature?
- What is the link between nature and romanticism?

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Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism For Third-Year Students



The objective of this book is to enable the students of English literary criticism to have insights into literary theories underpinning the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The book, in the process, is expected to cover a long period of the development of English literary theory with its going through cultural orientations to literary theories, in this context, are going to be mainly the foundation the literary activity of the two periods concerned: *Classicism and Romanticism*. The Eighteenth-century literary efforts and ideals are mainly based on the classical conception of the nature and function of art and literature as well as the classical emphasis on objectivity, in contrast with the nineteenth century poetry that operates within Romantic theory of poetry with its stress on subjectivity.